

# IBLIS

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# TRIGGER WARNING

Iblīs' Affliction contains explicit sexual scenes between men, strong language, dubious permission, scenes of gore, violence, murder, cheating, drug usage, and is intended for adult readers only. Iblīs' Affliction isn't for people with weak hearts or who are easily offended or shocked.

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# DEDICATION

To my adorable friend Azur, without whom this book would have never been written. Thank you for your insight into Turkish mentality, religion, and language. You are amazing!

To the Queen of Angst and my kickass editor Emma Jaye, who did the immense work of repairing my raped and mutilated grammar. Thank you for all your comments and smart-ass remarks that cracked me up.

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Without you all, I would never be where I am now. Thank you so much for making my life bright. I love you! <3

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Iblīs (Arabic إبليس)—*the primary devil in Islam.*

***“If you sleep with the Devil,  
don’t expect to get out of hell.”***

**DEMANDING. NEEDY. DANGEROUS.** Slater is everything Talha doesn’t want but everything the crime lord needs. The bloodiest ripper of Anatolia, nicknamed Iblīs, kills for him and warms his bed. Stuck in a power play and a loveless, symbiotic relationship, Talha knows that if he shows weakness, he will fall at the hand of his own weapon.

**THIRST FOR BLOOD, SEX, AND PAIN.** It drives Slater crazy. Only Talha can soothe the deep ache that grows stronger every day. Slater allows Master to think he is in charge until Talha cheats by changing the rules of their game. But Master doesn't grasp that there's no escape from Iblīs' affliction.

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# GLOSSARY

**Iblīs**—in the Quran Iblīs is described as the fallen jinn made of a smokeless fire and often is identified as Satan in the Christian Bible.

**Minik kuş**—little bird. (Turk.)

**Abi**—older brother. (Turk.)

**Kardeşim**—younger sibling. (Turk.)

**Geri çekil, köpek**—back off, dog! (Turk.)



**Hanımım /Hanım**—a female royal and aristocratic title / Mistress. (Turk.)

**Defol**—go away. (Turk.)

**Reis**—Master/Leader. (Turk.)

**Kilim**—a flat tapestry-woven carpet or rug.

**Imam** – a title of a worship leader of a mosque and Muslim community.

**Orospu çocuğu**—son of a bitch (Turk.)

**Bey**—Mister. (Turk.)

**Allahismarladik**—Allah greets you. (Turk.) Being said as a good bye.

**Güle-güle**—Bye-bye. (Turk.)

**Bismillah**—“In the name of God”; it is the first word in the Quran being said as a word of protection from evil. (Arabic)

**Abaya**—a simple, loose over-garment, essentially a robe-like dress, worn by some women in parts of the Muslim world.

**Hijab** —a headscarf worn by some Muslim women.

**Mashrabiya**—is an architectural element which is characteristic of Arabic residences. It is a type of projecting oriel window enclosed with carved wood latticework located on the second story of a building or higher, often lined with stained glass.

**Ağam için**—for Master. (Turk)

**Agha**—an honorific title for a civilian or military officer, or often part of such title, and was placed after the name of certain civilian or military functionaries in the Ottoman Empire. At the same time some court functionaries were entitled to the agha title. In Kurdistan the tribal Kurdish society gives the title “agha” to tribal chieftains - either supreme chieftains or village heads. It is also given to wealthy landlords and owners of major real estate in the urban Kurdish centers.

**Ifrit**—a powerful type of demon in Islamic mythology.

**Bedlah**—the belly dancer suit.

**Mardin’in Piçi**—Mardin’s bastard. (Turk.)

**Walī**—an Arabic word meaning “custodian”, “protector”, “helper”, “a man close to God”, or “holy man”. Wali is someone who has

“Walayah” (authority or guardianship) over somebody else.

**The Fajr prayer**—the first of the 5 daily prayers

**Salamün aleyküm**—a greeting in Arabic that means “Peace be upon you”.

**The Shahada**—the basic statement of the Islamic faith: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger.”

**The Golden Crescent**—the name given to one of Asia’s two principal areas of illicit opium production.

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**THE NOTHINGNESS SHATTERED** with the booming of heavy footsteps. The familiar scent of bitter almond and leather wafted through the air. It was about time as Slater's hands and legs shook

with pressure. His blood circulation slowed causing his limbs to go numb. A bit longer and he would have collapsed.

Every muscle shrieked in agony as he kneeled on the cold floor with his hands cuffed behind his back. The chain hanging from the evil hook in the ceiling barely reached his shoulder blades. The cuffs attached to the chain forced his arms up into an uncomfortable, strained position. He would have stood up to alleviate the pressure, but the shackles securing his ankles connected to his neck. With every move of his spine, the titan prong collar dug deeper into his throat.

“You are drooling...” Talha spoke in English. His low, husky voice with a heavy eastern accent engulfed Slater. The captive stilled, sensing the air shift. A hot palm brushed against his wet chin. Another hand fistful his hair and pulled backward. Slater’s spine vibrated with pressure as he arched his back. He almost whimpered when a buckle at his nape released, relieving the pain in his jaw. With a sluggish movement of his tongue, he tongued the ball-gag out of his mouth and tried to swallow, but the saliva flood only increased. Cold and sticky, it dripped down his chin.

A few bracing slaps brought his attention to his burning cheeks and his master.

“I have a job for you,” Talha stated in an emotionless voice. “Bite.”

A smell of glue preceded the roughness of paper, and a fat envelope shoved into his mouth.

“Hold.”

Slater squeezed his teeth, and a few drops of sweat skidded down his cheeks from under the leather blindfold. His jaw shook.

Talha tugged the hook, twisting Slater’s arms up even more before he released the hold. Sharp prongs bit deep into Slater’s neck, pushing a groan out of his throat. Doing his best not to drop the envelope, he arched his back, anticipating his master’s hand over his cold skin. After isolation, they always felt so warm, so good.

**CLICK.** The carabiner connecting his neck to his ankles came undone. Slater smiled, then rolled his shoulders easing the tension. Left then right, he cracked his neck trying to keep his balance. Every muscle in his body responded with the lingering pain of relaxation and prickles of rushing blood. His shackles clanged against the floor, stripping his weakened hands of support. Two doll-

like limbs fell forward and hit the coarse concrete. Heavy and unresponsive, they felt alien to his aching body.

He straightened and leaned forward, brushing his face against his master's knee in an attempt to lift the blindfold that stuck to his eyes. The leather gave in, and cool air hit his heated skin. He blinked the salt off, making out the soft light leaking through the basement door and his master's masculine frame towering above him.

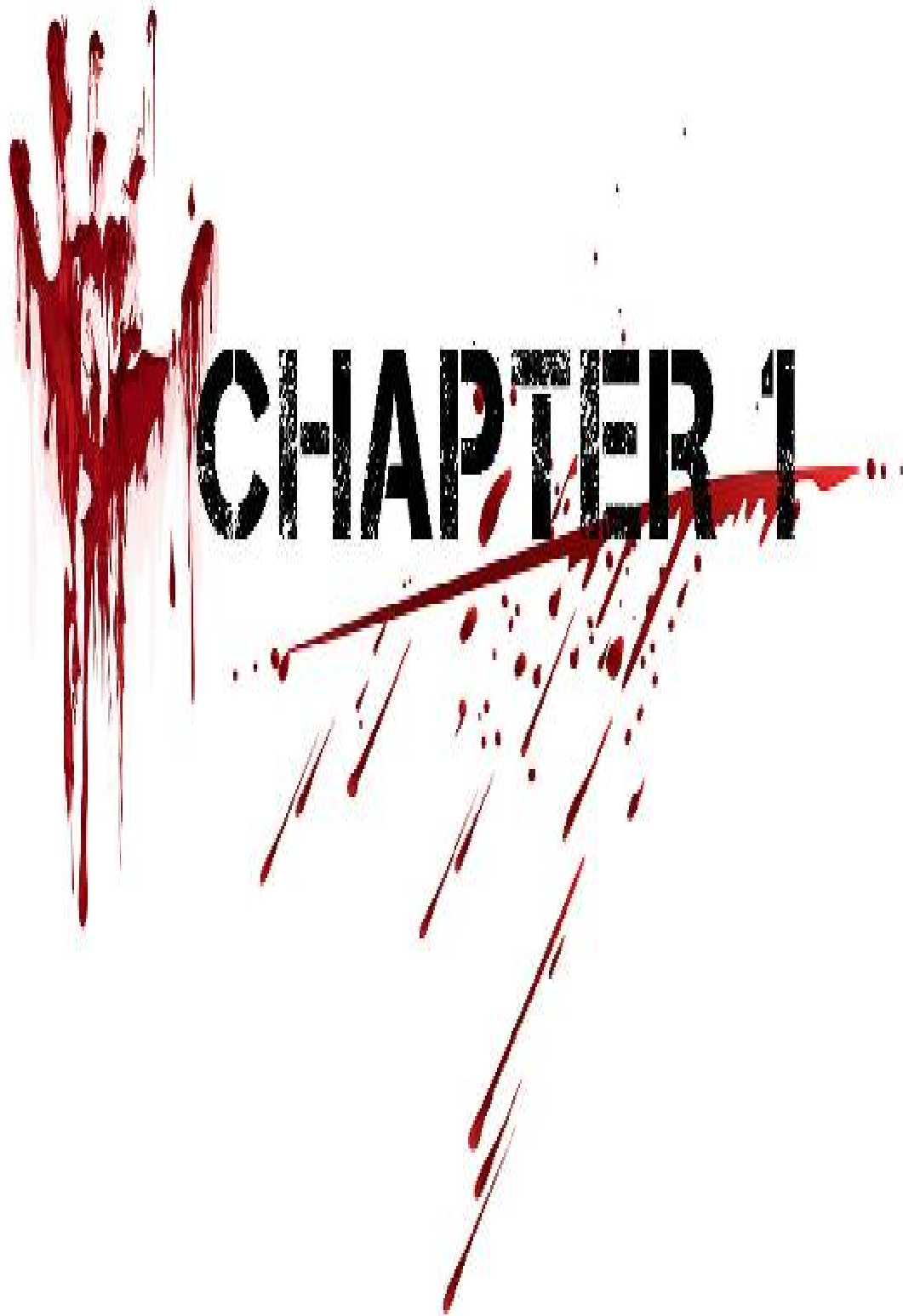
The paper envelope soaked with his saliva, dissolved in his mouth. Revolted, he leaned forward and dropped it to the floor.

"Thank you, Master," Slater's voice came out hoarse. Grinning, he inched forward and brushed his barely responsive tongue against Talha's shoe. A wet trail marred perfectly polished leather.

"You are gross..." Talha said. The shoe disappeared from under Slater's cheek, and acute pain blossomed as a heavy sole crushed down on his spine from above. "Clean yourself; you stink. We leave in two hours."



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**SITTING IN A PRIVATE JET**, Slater stretched his long legs over the black carpet. The gummy bear bag in his hands was half-empty, but he kept sending one candy after another into his mouth, enjoying the rich, juicy flavor spreading over his tongue. He moved his leg;

the toe of his shoe touched Talha's ankle, slid up his beige cotton pants, reached his thigh, then moved over it. Engrossed in reading a paper, Talha slapped Slater's foot away, then brushed non-existent dust off his pants.

Displeasure twitched in Slater's chest as having been swatted like an annoying fly. Shaking the irritation off, he sent another gummy bear into his mouth, then picked up the brown envelope and flipped it upside down. A pile of pictures scattered over the small wooden table separating him from Talha. Licking the lingering sweetness off his fingers, he snatched the top one.

A broad man in a business suit with a beer belly and an ugly, fat mole on his upper lip stared somewhere into the distance, beyond the camera. Beady black eyes lurked behind heavy eyelids and bushy brows.

The sour taste of disappointment, mixing with the rich cherry flavor, made Slater want to spit. This didn't look fun at all. He cocked his head, frowning. *Anyone could do this job, why bother me with someone this weak and fuzzy? What did he do to deserve me?*

He glanced at Talha, questioning his intentions, but his master was too busy to notice. Picking up the dossier, Slater scanned the paper, his mind photocopying everything he saw. A married businessman with three children and an innocent hobby of bringing underage kids into his private house. *Boring...*

"What did he do?" Slater folded the top sheet into a paper plane. Gliding his nail over the edges, he raised his hand and sent the plane toward Zaal, who sat in a deep black chair on the other side of the aisle. Broad and muscular, Talha's Georgian bodyguard irritated Slater from the first moment they had met. He instantly sensed the weakness lurking behind his dead, immobile eyes. No weak person deserved to be by his master's side. The paper plane hit Zaal's chest, covered with a bullet-proof vest, then crashed on his thighs. Hand on a holster, the bigger man flinched. His tanned face tensed as he granted Slater a glare full of contempt.

"None of your business," Talha replied in a calm voice. "And stop irritating Zaal. One day he'll shoot you, and I won't blame him for it."

"Boring..." Slater complained, but even if Master heard him he didn't show it.

Humming, Slater reached behind his back and fished out his karambit knife. A black matte claw landed into his palm like a



natural extension of his hand. He flipped it forward, backward, then forward again; his gaze trained on Talha's cool composure.

The atmosphere in the private cabin shifted. The discomfort coming from Zaal played on the strings of Slater's soul. Fear—sour and potent—penetrated the air as Zaal squirmed in his chair. Slater tasted the bodyguard's anxiety on his tongue, excitement quickening his blood. It would be so nice to paint the jet in red. Too bad Talha didn't like it messy.

Slater landed his free palm on the table, walked his fingers toward the pile of scattered papers, and picked up the nearest photo. Something in the target irritated him, but he couldn't put a finger on it. Grabbing the second page of the dossier, he glanced at the text. Except for keeping a money laundering firm and running a brothel, where he provided all kinds of treats for pedophiles and snuff lovers, the man was boring, harmless.

*Not so boring, if Master activated me...* Flipping the photo around his fingers, Slater stared at the picture. *Annoying...*

Concentration eluded him as his master's neglect added to his irritation. Squeezing the handle, he stabbed the image with his knife to see if the sound would make Talha flinch. It didn't.

Dissatisfied, Slater snatched his bag and pulled out his whetstone. The blade met the abrasive surface with a beautiful, nerve-wrenching screech, over and over again. Slater had never used guns; they were for women and weak people. He didn't need one. His karambits were his claws, shades of night—his camouflage, and his entire body—the deadliest weapon evolution had ever created. Nothing on earth could chill the blood faster than a swish of a blade cutting through a silent night. *Unless...*

“Should I sharpen my teeth, Master? Wouldn't that be cool?”

As the idea occurred, he faced the bodyguard, locking his eyes with the black, wide-set ones. The sour smell intensified, as tension built in Zaal's big, meaty body with every move of his knife. The vein on Zaal's neck trembled, and a thin layer of perspiration coated his forehead.

“No,” Talha said without looking up.

“Why not?” Slater's aggressive attention returned to his master. Seconds ticking in his head, he studied Talha's intelligent eyes scrolling through the paper but Master said nothing more. The caged agitation that he'd tried to suppress from the moment of his

release now buzzed in every cell ready to discharge. One minute, two, Slater waited; when he grew tired, the blade met with the stone again. Falling into the trance the rhythmical sound provided, Slater didn't notice a hand entering his private space, and the whetstone was snatched from his hand. Slater met his master's warning gaze.

"Be quiet," Talha ordered as his hand slipped the whetstone into the inner pocket of his beige jacket.

Slater loved his master's timbre. Just like the sun-weathered face, Talha's voice was dry, rough, entrancing. It never failed to make Slater hold his breath to taste his every word.

Using the moment, Slater complained, "I'm bored, Master..."

Talha glanced over the paper, and every small hair on Slater's arms rose in anticipation.

"Master?"

"Are you done?" Talha spoke after a brief silence.

"Yes..."

"Did you memorize everything already?"

The soft words flowed through Slater's system, making him crave the touch of fire and ice only his master could provide. "Yes."

"Then watch clouds."

"For four hours?" Slater almost choked on his saliva, but Talha's focus had already abandoned him. The man lifted the paper, and Slater lost his patience. Flipping the blade in the air, he leaned over and sliced the thin paper from top to bottom. The long sheet fell apart in Talha's hands, forcing the man to grant him his whole attention.

From the corner of his eye, Slater saw Zaal grabbing his gun. His finger eager to pull the trigger as a grin of excitement stretched his mouth. The black muzzle of the gun burned Slater's temple, but he didn't care. The tension compressed and sprung in his chest as the liquid amber of Talha's eyes oozed into his soul. Heaving a sigh, Talha dismissed Zaal with a flick of his wrist, then folded the shredded paper in the middle.

"So needy... What do you want, Mutt?"

"Play with me..."

"No." The sharp reply made Slater's cheek twitch.

“I’m bored, Master. Play with me.” Irritation found its way into his voice alongside the demanding notes.

“No. I need you fit.” Not compromising, Talha glanced at his watch. “Entertain yourself. I have to work.”

“Fine...” Slater hissed.

Talha reached under his seat and pulled out the laptop. Slater’s focus slipped down but stumbled over the shirt. Too many pieces of clothing covered this muscular body for Slater’s liking. The desire to spoil Talha’s designer suit, so the man would strip, poisoned his blood.

His tennis shoe bumped against the black leather of the seat in front, as Slater spread his legs apart. The zipper vibrated against his groin, coming undone slot by slot a moment before he shimmed his ass out of his jeans and took his heavy cock into his palm. His gaze traveled up Talha’s smooth, square jaw to the hard line of his mouth. Five years older than Slater, Talha was broader, an inch taller, and a bit more muscular. At thirty-three, with his hair brushed back, he looked a couple of years older. His slightly arched brows and nose, broken in fights, enhanced his predatory aura.

Lust spiked Slater’s blood, splashing red desire all over his vision. Relaxing against his seat, he licked his lips. Talha’s rough skin allured him to lean closer and moisten it with his tongue.

At the hazy edge of his vision, Zaal’s face contorted in disgust, the conflict of interests twisting his features in an unreadable grimace. Slater didn’t care.

The air scraped his throat with every shaky breath; precum leaked over his fingers, marring his jeans. The uncomfortable atmosphere thickened as emotions streamed through the air. Disgust, hatred, contempt, discomfort, ignorance—all had colors and scents that crawled under Slater’s skin, igniting his depravity. His soul burned with all-consuming arousal. Slater craved Talha to look, and Talha did.

A surprised glance held and lingered. The rough mouth curled up in a lopsided smirk as a long, index finger brushed over the chapped lips, betraying Talha’s building arousal. Slater shivered under his cannibalistic stare.

“Need help?” Talha murmured. The cloud of discomfort emitting from Zaal darkened.

Slamming his laptop closed, Talha put it aside and removed the table. The papers scattered over the floor. His foot slid up the denim fabric toward Slater's groin. Pressing down, it scratched the skin on the back of Slater's hands and terminated the stimulation. Not gentle, not caring, but rough, authoritative, merciless. Pressure crushed Slater's cock and balls, making him shudder.

"Hurts..." The weak complaint only made Talha's lips twitch.

"Hands." The husky voice seeping into Slater's soul demanded obedience.

Instantly dropping his hands, Slater welcomed the direct skin to sole contact. His lungs burned from oxygen deprivation, forcing his nails to scratch a long trail under his t-shirt to alleviate the pressure in his chest and gain more pain. Up and down, the rough underside of the shoe rubbed his cock, the cruel heel meeting his balls with every thrust.

"You're such a horny dog, aren't you?" Talha observed.

Slater whimpered and closed his eyes, concentrating on the burning sensation growing in his lower belly. His thighs shook following the jerky rhythm of Talha's foot as the cleansing pain burned every thought out of his head, leaving only lust behind.

"What should I do with you?"

Holding his breath, Slater listened to the voice of his master. The voice that had guided him through so much pain and pleasure; the voice that knew what he needed better than anyone else. *More. Rougher. Harder.* This wasn't enough; chasing his pleasure, he thrust his hips forward, imprinting himself into Talha's shoe. A shudder ran through his body, and a weak, shaky plea escaped his lips, "More, Master."

"So demanding..." Talha rustled. At that moment, Slater was ready to do everything for him, if only his master kept pressing, kept rubbing his dick with his foot. His nails dug deeper into his chest as he threw his head back. He growled as the pressure accumulated in his groin and discharged in a vigorous impulse of energy that seized every muscle in his body with a painful spasm.

"So fast..." Mockery in Talha's voice slapped his cheeks with the searing heat of humiliation. "On your knees."

Face red, Zaal growled and stormed out of the private cabin. For a split second, Slater detested him even more, but Talha's gaze,

brimming with raw hunger, evaporated every thought out of his head.

Unable to resist the temptation, Slater dropped to his knees on the soft flooring, ogling Master's groin. The fabric, stretching over, outlined Talha's thick, long cock that begged to be licked. *Looks painful...* Willing to relieve the pressure with his mouth, Slater crawled closer, put his palm on Talha's knee, but the calm voice froze his motor functions with a single 'no'.

Slater peered up, confused. Waiting for the order, he held his breath.

With a quick movement of his chin, Talha pointed to his shoe. "You made it dirty. Clean it."

Slater gasped and dropped down, digging his nails into the soft pile of the carpet. Heart drumming in his ears, he whispered, "Yes, Master."



***SO TROUBLESOME...*** TALHA THOUGHT, watching Slater's tongue work. With every passing day, Slater became needier, more demanding. Controlling his demons had been exhausting. It often required a lot of Talha's time and energy. If he hadn't been locking Slater in the basement, his business would have been fucked long ago.

Slater's lean body, dressed in blue jeans and a simple black t-shirt, moved with every lick. A warm nose brushed against his ankle, and Talha closed his eyes, suppressing the urge to fist Slater's black hair and guide his head toward his groin. Only the thought that it would be exactly what Slater wanted—to control him, to set his own rules—stopped him.

*So troublesome...* He peered down. The lazy licks of Slater's tongue erased the last drops of cum as he shot up a look full of expectation.

"You are in pain, Master." Slater didn't ask, but stated in a liquid, variable voice; the intonation flowed from high to low and back with every syllable. Getting up from all fours to his knees, he slid his hot hands up Talha's thighs. "I'll help."

Captivated by the fluid movements of his body, Talha thought that he would never get used to the instant changes in Slater's behavior. One second—forceful and aggressive—Slater challenged his authority; the next—soft, compliant, obedient—obeying his every order like a loyal dog.

The warm tongue licked a trail up Talha's pants, causing all his being to scream 'yes', but his lips released a cold, measured, "No."

Disappointment clouded Slater's eyes, but he didn't retreat. The heat of his breath oozed through the fabric, reaching Talha's cock, as the rebellious mouth moved up to the zipper.

"I said enough, Mutt!" Talha stood up, shoving Slater aside with his knee.

Unable to retain his balance, the younger man whacked against the opposite seat. A predatory grin bared his teeth, bringing forward a blood-thirsty sneer. Talha ignored it. Trying to calm down, he strolled out of the private cabin toward the tail of the plane, then entered the bathroom. His palm slapped the mirror as he bent over the sink and splashed cold water on his face. The drops heating on his skin failed to quench the all-consuming thirst for carnal pleasure that Slater ignited within him.

*I should have beaten the crap out of him sooner. Fucking Mutt, I wonder when he will stop challenging me, if ever...*

The soft click of the door opening kicked Talha out of his thoughts. Instinctively, he faced the noise. His eyes locked with the

wicked smile stretching Slater's full lips. Pressing an index finger to his mouth, his reaper shushed, "Shhh..."

The lock clicked closed behind his back, and Talha clenched his teeth.

"Slater," pressing an order into his tone, he demanded obedience. Usually, the sound of his name settled Slater for a moment, switched on his brain, but this time it did the opposite.

"Master?" The ripper's intonation jumped from low to high, informing Talha that this wasn't enough to keep Slater under control anymore. Not today. "Slater has been good. Slater waited as Master asked. Slater did nothing to disappoint Master. Why Master refuses Slater? Doesn't Slater deserve to be praised? Or, maybe, Master doesn't want Slater anymore?"

*Fuck...* Dangerous notes seeped into Slater's voice, as he stepped forward, imprinting himself into Talha's body. The heat of his chest burned through two layers of clothes, inflaming Talha's skin, and with the heat came the clean, familiar scent. Cloves and wood, with a sweet, flowery touch that smelled weirdly fascinating on a murderer's body. Filling his lungs with Slater's scent, Talha gave in.

"You are such a disobedient dog..." he sighed. Fingers clasping Slater's elbow, he shoved the man toward the white marble sink. Palms slapping against a wide mirror above, the ripper grinned, establishing eye contact through the reflection. "Drop it."

"Yes, Master..." Impatient fingers yanked the belt off and tossed it on the floor before Slater pushed his pants down.

Leaning against the opposite wall, Talha let his eyes wander. The intense moment passed; now he needed Slater to get the edge off, and everything would be under his control again.

Slater's back arched as he hooked the waistband of his jeans with his thumbs and peeled himself out of the second skin of his black trunks, revealing his tanned, sun-kissed butt cheeks covered with bumpy cane scars.

Undoing his own pants, Talha released his aching cock. Red and pumped, it glistened with precum. Licking his lips, he said, "I'm going to enjoy a joint. If you can't make us both cum before I finish, you will get nothing, but if you succeed, I will reward you here and now."

A shudder ran down Slater's muscular back, he bucked his ass against Talha's groin, then spat on his palm, and reached behind, smearing the spittle over his hole.

Talha's heart pounded; heat rushed into his head, erasing everything except Slater's trembling fingers massaging the entrance. The first knuckle of the middle finger dipped into the hole; before Slater plunged two more fingers inside. His body froze, chest fell in a painful exhale, and he whipped his chin to his right shoulder. In and out, he prepared himself for Talha's cock, granting his master a marvelous view. Deep pink flickered between his fingers with every thrust, making Talha want to drop on his knees and press his mouth to the round globes of Slater's ass. He was about to reach forward and lend the younger man another finger when Slater withdrew. His palm wound around Talha's cock and guided him in.

The painful pressure of the tight muscle ring gripped Talha's erect flesh. Suppressing a flinch, he leisurely pulled a joint out of his chest pocket, stroked a lighter, filling the small cabin with the distinctive smell of weed. He took a draw and stilled, accommodating the acrid smoke in his lungs.

Slater's hips moved. With every jerk, his buttocks collided with Talha's hips. His black t-shirt changed color, a deeper hue spreading between his shoulder blades and under his arms. Perspiration covered his neck and temples, and the sounds of his heavy breathing filled the air. Slater reached down to grab his own dick, but the weed kicking in Talha's head, pushed an order out of his mouth. "No hands. Cum like this."

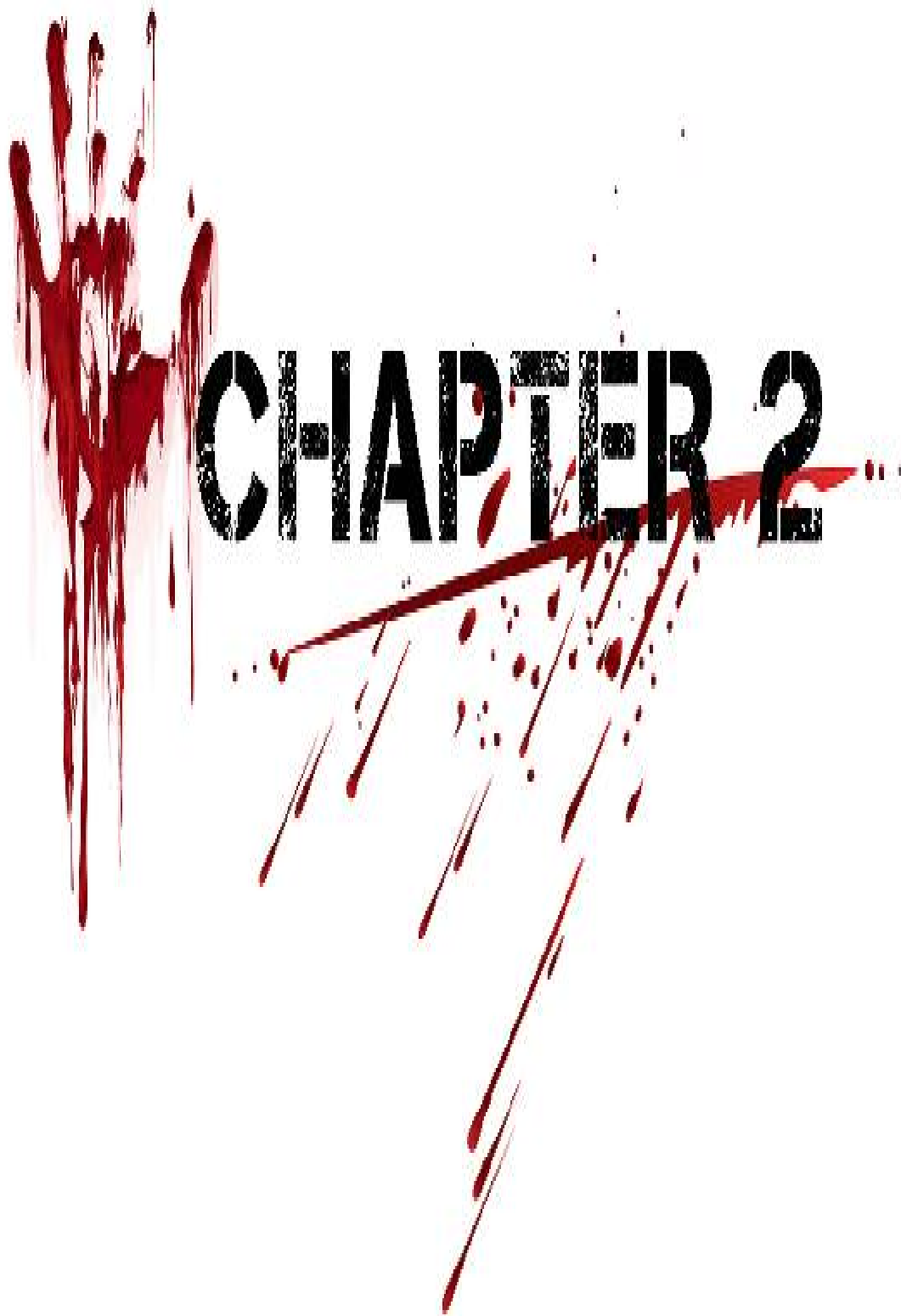
The mirror linked their gazes, and Talha swallowed. The beautiful color of arousal splashed over Slater's angular cheekbones; lips darkened from constant biting. The way he inclined his head back, revealed his protruding Adam's apple, making Talha want to taste it.

"I'll help you." Talha blew out a cloud of smoke, before sucking in another draw. His free hand clasped the ripper's throat and squeezed. The vibration, coming from another body, unsettled his every cell as he threw himself forward, welcoming it. Chest to back, he twisted Slater's head to the side and smashed their mouths together. The acrid smoke transferred from throat to throat as Talha crushed the joint against the top of Slater's right hand, creating a fresh burn among the many old, whitened, round scars.





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**“DO YOU UNDERSTAND?”** Standing in the middle of the crowded airport, Talha stared Slater in the eye. Even after taking a shower and sleeping for an hour, Slater looked flustered, worked-up.

He shifted and the warmth radiating from his body hit Talha's skin with the faint smell of body wash.

"Yes, Master."

"No one else, just him," Talha repeated, making sure Slater understood.

"Yes, Master."

"Once you're done, you catch a return flight to Istanbul. You talk to no one, you go straight home without stopping anywhere, and you wait for me there. If you're good, I'll reward you," staring into the icy-blue eyes, Talha instructed articulating every word to make sure the order stayed with Slater. "But if you're bad, you'll never have freedom again, understand?"

"Why Master doesn't go with Slater to Edinburgh?" Slater cocked his head to the side. His fingers grasped the middle button of Talha's shirt and tugged.

"I have important things to do in London."

"Why can't Slater go to London? Slater wants to be with Master." Slater's glare was hard, questioning, as he inched forward, his breath playing over Talha's lips.

"I have no time to deal with you, and you proved that you can't behave for even four hours."

A deep crease cut between Slater's brows. His ears twitched with tension that seized his facial muscles. Before Slater could protest again, Talha added, "Can I trust you, Slater? Or should I send you home with Zaal and assign this job to someone else?"

"No, Master." All the hatred in the world boiled in Slater's voice. His hand withdrew as his eyes found Zaal. Talha thought that if a glare could kill, his bodyguard would be long dead. "Slater will do it. Master will be pleased."

"Good boy," Talha said, catching Slater's cold gaze and his hand. "I'm going to give you something in advance. If you are good, I promise, I will make sure you are satisfied."

His thumb found the fresh bandage on the top of Slater's hand, then pressed. Slater hissed; his lips drew up in an animalistic grin. His eyes shut in an attempt to contain the pain that trembled in every muscle.

"Will you be good, Slater? Can I trust you?"

A soft smile of satisfaction touched the edges of his mouth. “Yes, Master.”

“Here is your ticket and some cash.” Releasing his hand, Talha fished an envelope out of the inner pocket of his jacket. “Only him, Slater. No one else.”

With a quick nod, Slater took the envelope, spun on his heels, and strolled toward the departure gates.



**OILY, BLACK EYES STARED AT SLATER** from below, as the colorless lips froze in a silent ‘O’, chasing for air. Limbs contracting, trying to regain control over the cut muscles, the man wobbled with his whole body, creating ripples that rushed from his lower belly up to his second chin. And with every twitch of his abdomen, his fat mole trembled above his nearly non-existent upper lip.

Slater’s fingers curled with painful urgency he couldn’t understand. He tilted his head left, then right, his shoulders tensing as he searched for the reason for his discomfort. Usually, a murder brought him delight. The smell of fear and panic so dense in the air, he should be high with it, but something about this man made him itchy. Spinning the karambit around his index finger, Slater bent forward, examining the terror-stricken face. Beady eyes, small nose, and thin lips. Nothing special, then why did this man annoy him this

much? Oily skin with huge pores, rare black facial hair, and a fat, ugly mole. Trembling and vibrating, the mole captivated him, making his chest buzz with irritation. Unable to tear his focus away from it, he said, “You are so ugly... I can’t kill you like this. Let me fix it for you.”

The edge of the knife touched the base of the mole, slid under, and sliced it off. Slater shook the black piece of flesh off the blade with disgust, then looked the man in the eye.

“See? So much better! Now we can proceed.” A smile of relief released the tension, as Slater put the knife over the man’s belly, drove the karambit in his solar plexus, then tore down.



**“ANOTHER MURDER IN EDINBURGH** consumes the attention of the law machinery. The brutality of the murder suggests that this is yet another victim of the infamous ripper from Anatolia—Iblīs. A few hours ago, Boris Alby was found dead in his house in Ravelston. Pieces of his disfigured body were scattered throughout the house along with a large amount of disturbing child pornography.”

Talha switched off the TV and smiled at his business partner.

“I did my part of our agreement,” he said, looking into the warm gray eyes of the silver-headed man. In his sixties, Steven Hale

was fit and lean. The straight line of his spine and the broad shoulders screamed of his military background, but his expression was confused, lost; he scouted his surroundings. “Your turn.”

“Yes, of course, my turn...” the man said, and glanced at his hands, then at the door, but the confusion remained in his eyes. “I’m sorry, what are we playing again?”

“I’ll take it from here, Daddy.” The ringing voice made Talha face the door. A woman entered the room, and Talha searched his memory. *Camilla Hale, the only daughter.*

With her platinum hair slicked back in a ponytail and the hard stare of her blue eyes on a doll-like face in her thirties, she looked both young and old. Closing a massive mahogany door behind her slender frame, she came up to Steven and placed her palm on his shoulder. “It’s okay; you can go, Daddy. Mr. Demir and I have a lot to talk about.”

Carefully guiding her father toward the exit, she let him out, then closed the door behind him.

She faced Talha. Never offering him a seat, she remained standing. He wondered if it was some kind of psychological warfare or urgency. “The conditions have changed, Mr. Demir.”

Curiosity curled his lips up as he watched the delicate woman move.

“You see,” she smiled back, but her eyes remained cold, attentive. “Daddy isn’t getting better. Alzheimer’s is a bitch, and right now, I’m taking a risk telling you this. But I believe we can find common ground.”

She drew closer; the faint smell of camellias washed over Talha. Her white blouse, unbuttoned at the top, revealed a pearl necklace and a simple gold cross. “The Hale family is only this old because we trust in blood. So, now the alliance comes with me.”

“That wasn’t a part of the deal,” Talha rapped out the measured words.

“No. But it’s on the table now.” Her confidence suggested that Steven Hale had transferred his empire to his daughter long ago, and Talha now spoke to the true leader of the Hale family. “You see, the older father gets, the more unstable my position in the organization becomes. Being a woman is hard in our world. I work harder than anyone, yet it’s never enough. I constantly have to prove that I’m better than everyone else, or people won’t follow me. To be

honest, I'm tired of it. I made a decision: I need a man to represent my power, to support me. Now, I extend the offer, Talha. It's no longer just a channel; it's control over the heart of Europe, but it comes with a ring, and you adopt my surname. The Hale family will not stop with me."

Talha laughed, listening to the small arrogant woman. He could break her neck with one hand, yet she dared to talk to him like this, to propose such a thing. "You, western girls, are born with balls, aren't you? Maybe because your men don't have them?"

"Maybe." Smiling, she squared her shoulders and raised her chin. "So instead of a year of privileges, I offer you a lifetime of power." Reading his face, she added, "Don't worry, it's just business. I'm not going to be a jealous wife. You'll have to remain faithful to me until I'm pregnant. You have to indulge me—I don't share a cock. After this, you are free to do whatever you want, so do I. Of course, it will all be written in a contract."

Curious, Talha flicked a hand in the air, asking her to elaborate. If a man had dared to talk to him like this, he would have already broken his neck, but this little lady provided entertainment.

"The one, who owns London, owns the heart of Europe. As the new leader of the Hale family, you will have limitless power, but I want something back. I want to retain my position. I decide what is good for the family here, but you can have the title like my father does now. Of course, I won't interfere with your business in Anatolia. You can use our resources as you please, as long as you don't cross my plans. And as a wedding gift, I want Iblīs<sup>[1]</sup>."

"Your head is in the clouds, Minik kuş<sup>[2]</sup>." Talha chuckled.

"This is a good deal, Talha. You are the first man I'm offering it to." Her smile grew bigger. "If you refuse, I'll keep my father's word and grant you one year, as we agreed. But soon enough, I will find someone else, and then London will be closed to you forever. I chose you because people respect and follow you, even the Devil himself. And you are handsome, so I don't have to retch every time we fuck. On the contrary, I look forward to it."

Unable to hold back, Talha laughed. The more he listened to the small woman talk, the more his mood improved.

"You are cute, Minik kuş. I like you," he said; his hand caressed her shoulder. "So here is what you're gonna get. I'll marry you, and I'll support you, but my surname stays with me. You can keep yours if you wish, but if you bear a son, he will be Demir, not

Hale. My surname comes first. If you need a pushover, you can find a western man with no balls. And you can't have Iblīs. No offense, Minik kuş, but he will not follow you."

Her face didn't change, as if she expected this answer, and his respect for her increased.

"He will if you order him to. Everybody knows he follows your every word." She pressed her lips together, her eyes steely, cold. "I want him to be loyal to me too. I want him to treat my enemies as his own. I want him to protect me, if not as his Mistress then as your wife. Order him to do this or it's no deal."

"You don't know what you are asking for." Talha's smile fell as he examined her serious face. "If you play with the Devil you always have to pay. You will come to regret it, but it will be too late. No one controls Iblīs."

"I'll take my chances," she said, tensing under his touch.

"If you're scared, I'll provide you with loyal people; people who will die for you. You'll be safe." Noticing the hard line of her mouth, Talha decided that this deal wasn't about her needing his support. She didn't care about the Hale name either. All she wanted was Iblīs. "Who are you scared of, Minik kuş?"

"I'm scared of no one. I want him to ensure my power. Iblīs, or no deal," she pushed the words through gritted teeth, never looking away.

"Fine... I'll take what you are offering, but you will regret it, Minik kuş." Raising his open palm in the air, Talha gave up.

"We will see. Invite me to dinner to close the deal."





**THE BURN PULSED AND STUNG** under his finger pads. The bandage his master had applied was gone, and the crimson blemish glistened with lymph, indicating his body's attempt to repair the damage. He shouldn't be rubbing it, but he couldn't help brushing his thumb over the red, damaged area, reanimating Talha's incandescent touch in his memory.

Standing in the middle of the airport, he stared at the departure board. Boarding to his flight had been announced, but his legs refused to move. Something itched in his chest as if an important piece of his body was missing. The empty space gnawed at his other organs, looking for a substitute.

"I wish Master was here." He dropped his gaze to his ticket. "I don't want to go alone..."

*'If you're good, I'll reward you.'* Talha's words replayed in his mind. The invisible clamps of loneliness squeezed his heart as he remembered the rest. *'But if you're bad, you'll never have freedom again, you understand?'*

He tilted his head to the side.

"I don't want freedom. I want to see Master..." His fingers unclenched, dropping the ticket to the gray carpet. With the decision made, the invisible weight, that had crushed him the whole day,

lifted from his chest. Stepping on the ticket, he strolled toward an airline counter.



**A STRONG AIR CURRENT HIT HIS FACE**, stirring his hair and welcoming him into the darkness of the suite. Ghosting through the shadows, Slater stalked toward a wall-size window; his gaze stumbled at the panoramic view across London that sprawled under the dark, cloudless sky. The bright moon reflected in the black waters of the Thames. Its bluish light leaking through the window illuminated the room's luxurious atmosphere. Slater couldn't help noticing that water still bubbled in the Jacuzzi, and two wine glasses guarded the rim.

Something twitched in his guts, awakening an unfamiliar, burning sensation that resembled irritation. Mixed with longing, it poisoned his blood. His jaw hurt with tension as he bypassed a fireplace and a low marble table on his walk to the bedroom.

The acrid stench of sex and a woman's perfume slammed against his face as soon as his foot crossed the threshold. Flinching back, he tugged his shirt over his nose. All his being rebelled, screaming at him to get out of the bedroom, but the insurmountable tug of gravity inched him forward. Lurking in the shadows of a closet, he edged to the bed.

The dead light of the moon silvered the crumpled, messy linens and played with the platinum hair of a woman sprawled across the bed. A pale, dead-like hand, so slender that any strong wind could break it, twined around Talha's tanned torso.

"Is that so, Master..." A muscle under Slater's eye twitched as a bitter taste flooded his mouth. The spring in his body tightened, vibrating with pressure. The barely audible sound it emitted penetrated his ears. He couldn't understand what caused the discomfort, but the tightness in his chest only aggravated.

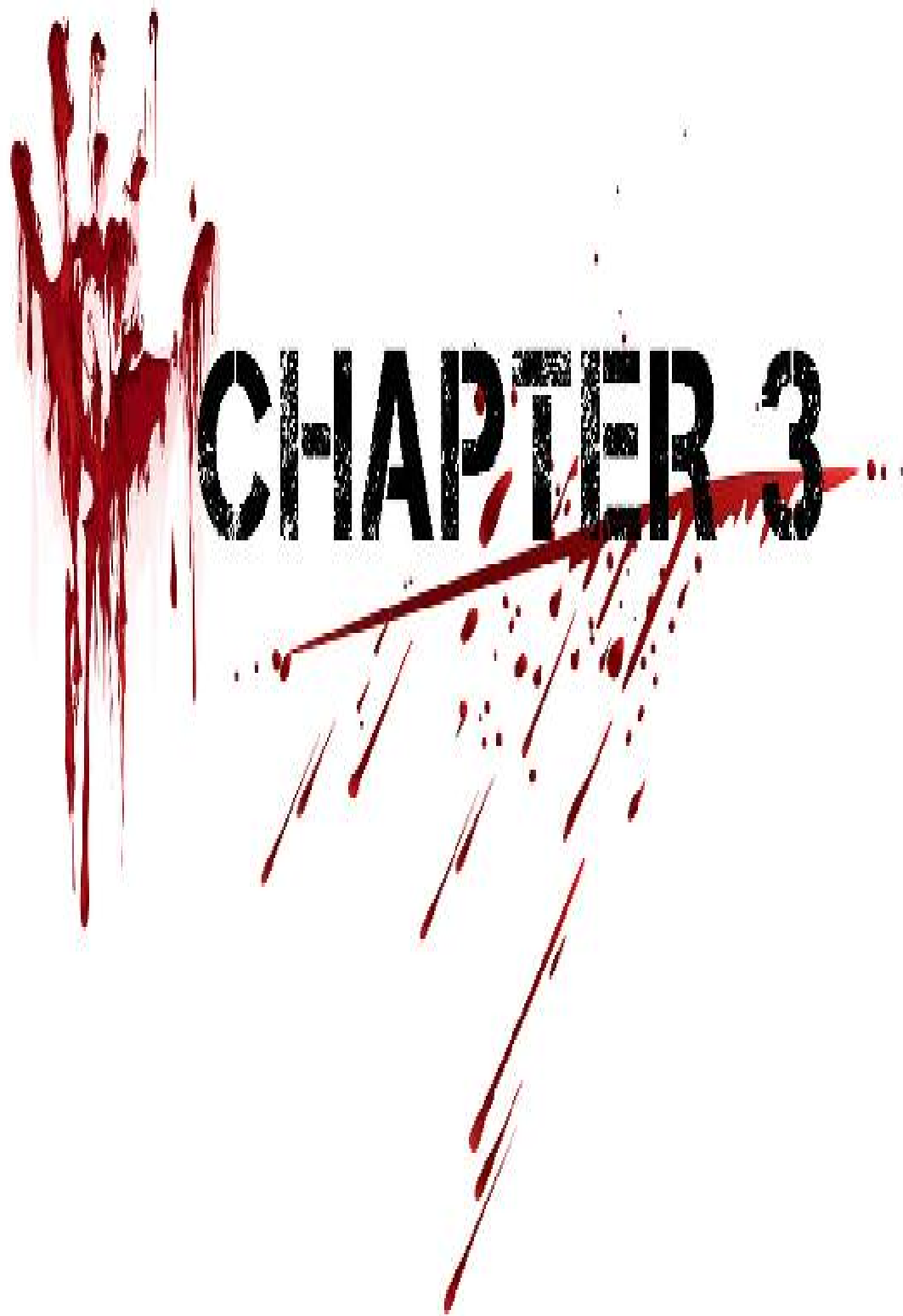
His gaze darted all over the scene until returning to the arm, long fingers, and polished nails that sharply contrasted with Talha's dark body.

*The hand doesn't belong...*

Twirling on his heels, he stormed out of the room.



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**“YOU’VE BEEN GOOD,”** Talha murmured and wrapped his arms around Slater’s torso. The clean, heady scent filling his lungs, he dug his face in the ripper’s soft, short hair. The strong muscles tensed

under his touch. Even through the black hoodie, Talha could outline the relief of his rippled stomach.

“Where have you been, Master?” The liquid, unstable voice trembled in the gloom.

Talha frowned. Usually, Slater would be delighted to get his reward, but he didn't look happy at all. Eyes cast down, Slater avoided meeting his gaze.

*What the fuck is wrong?* Alert, Talha studied the perfect profile. Calm, beautiful, rough; who could say it belonged to the bloodiest ripper in Anatolia? Releasing the man from his embrace, Talha switched on the night lamp. A soft, golden light illuminated the carved wood of his Mauritanian style bedroom. Strained shoulders, downcast eyes, clenched fists made Slater look... *guilty?* Examining the ripper's tense frame, Talha went for his usual, matter of fact statement. “None of your business, Mutt.”

But instead of acceptance or submission, Slater spat out, “You reek of a bitch, Master.”

The words worked like a slap, flooding Talha's face with searing heat. For a moment, he wasn't sure how to react. Alertness spiking as his wary gaze roamed over the floor, then back to Slater.

*How does he know? Who told him?* Slater's abilities to detect sounds and smells had always been above average, but even with his sharp sense of smell, he wouldn't be able to say what had happened a day ago, as Talha had showered twice since then. *Or...* He swallowed. *Fuck me...*

Subduing the defensive impulse to cross his arms over his chest, Talha let them hang freely alongside his body. “Are you jealous?”

“No, Master.”

“Good.” Adding a fair amount of dissatisfaction and ice into his voice, Talha forced the words through gritted teeth, “Then why don't you clean me up with your tongue, you disloyal dog?”

Slater spun, finally facing him; his lips twitched, but he didn't drop on his knees. His shoulders squared, head tilted to the side, and a deadly warning glinted in the depth of his squinted eyes.

“Look down, Mutt!” The back of Talha's hand connected with Slater's cheek with a ringing **SMACK**. Head whipped to the

side, the younger man blinked. Confusion crossed his face as he raised his eyes.

“I said, drop your fucking gaze!” This time, knuckles colliding with a cheekbone, threw Slater to the floor. Shaking his head, the ripper wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and froze, examining a red, glistening line stretching over his skin.

“You disobeyed me,” Talha stated, trying to shake the chill of disappointment that panged his heart. “You’ve been in London, haven’t you?”

Silence. Talha clenched his teeth and crashed his shoe against Slater’s ribs. With a gasp, the ripper doubled over on the fluffy, red and white carpet. Hands clasp his torso, his body convulsed, seized by a violent fit. Harsh breathing filled the air, interrupted by barking coughs. Despite the obvious pain, Slater’s arctic glare stayed glued to Talha.

Shifting his focus from the ripper to the white plaster molded ceiling, Talha searched for the right words. His gaze slipped down a golden stone wall until it reached a massive bed, draped over with an embroidered bedspread and silky pillows.

“Slater...” The impact from the punch still buzzed in his knuckles, and Talha brushed his fingers across them. Smearing Slater’s blood over the skin, he watched it dry under his touch. “If you don’t follow my orders, get the fuck out.” The words scratched his throat, but he still forced them out. Reaching Slater’s ears they sank deep, clouding his eyes with confusion and disbelief. “I don’t need a disloyal dog.”

Cheek twitching, Slater’s lips drew up baring his teeth in a painful, animalistic snarl.

“No. Master can’t...” The bloody, wicked smile of doubt lit up the beaten face as the ripper propped himself on an elbow, washing Talha with a bold, challenging look.

“I can,” Talha deadpanned. “If you don’t follow my orders, you have no right to call me Master. If you want to stay, you have to do exactly what I say.” Pausing, he let the ripper process the information.

Knuckles blanched white where Slater dug his fingers into the thick carpet. A blue vein swelled on his temple, and forced, venomous words left his mouth. “Slater always does what Master wants...”

“No,” Talha corrected. “Slater always does what Slater wants. You failed me. You disobeyed. Name one reason why I should keep you?”

A murderous glare flashed up, alerting Talha but the ripper lowered it the next instant. “Slater will do everything for Master.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Slater will stay.”

“Fine.” In a heartbeat, Talha materialized by the ripper’s side. Grabbing Slater’s chin he forced it up. A thumb, brushing over the plump mouth, stretched the bottom lip down, revealing the perfect row of white teeth. “Lick me clean.”

Seconds ticked, morphing Slater’s face into a battlefield of emotions. His nostrils flared, jaw bulged, lips quivered, but he still stretched them in a deadly smile.

“As you wish, Master...” The snake-like hissing emerged from Slater’s throat as he leaned forward, picking up the zipper of Talha’s pants with his teeth, then tugged it down. His fingers found the belt, yanked it out of the loops, then cast it aside. Never tearing his glare from his master’s face, Slater peeled Talha’s pants down along with the underwear.

Warm breath hitched against Talha’s soft flesh, refueling his lost arousal. His cock twitched, as a hesitant tongue brushed against his length as if Slater expected to taste a woman on him. This forced obedience, mixed with the indignation glowing in Slater’s eyes, triggered something raw and brutal in Talha. The heat, spreading from his stomach, reached his head, drowning everything in an impenetrable red fog of pure lust. His mouth parched. Needy fingers, looking for distraction, entwined in Slater’s hair; his other hand seized his twitching length and squeezed the first clear drop out.

Bringing Slater’s face closer, Talha smeared the precum over his lips. Slater shuddered, pulled back, and his spine, as if breaking, snapped forward. His face softened and pink touched his cheeks, spreading down to his neck. He swallowed and looked up with a completely different gaze. The hatred vanished, leaving behind a burning, zealous demand.

*That’s it, Talha thought. Submit to me, and I’ll make you feel good.*

With a flick of his wrist, Talha slapped the plump lips with his length, again and again. Pupils blown out, Slater caught a



shimmering thread of precum stretching down Talha's cock with the tip of his tongue.

*So fucking perfect...* Talha thought as Slater sank into submission. Lean, sinewy frame, long arms, and muscular shoulders, yet sensual eyes, sinful lips, and olive skin flushed with the glowing color of lust. Corrupt, immoral, and lewd, he was pristine in his depravity. The thought that someone so strong, impulsive, and deadly submitted to his will, unleashed the darkest desires in Talha's chest, making him want to push the boundaries and learn the limits of Slater's obedience.

"Lick..." he ordered and tensed as the blissful hotness of the mouth enveloped his cock. Pushing a breath out, Talha relaxed. Slater was rarely aggressive when aroused, and it didn't look like he would strike anytime soon.

The curled up tongue lapped over the bottom side of Talha's cock and trailed a swollen blue vein. The ripper shuffled closer. A cold ear pressed to Talha's hip and a warm nose brushed against his sack before Slater nuzzled his groin. Talha gasped as strong teeth seized the stretchy skin of his balls, pulled it, then sucked on it.

Talha itched to reach out and wipe the bloody saliva off the corner of Slater's mouth but refrained. Slater didn't need care and affection. He needed a firm, brutal hand to guide him through pain and life.

A tepid tongue, painting a wet trail up his length, brought Talha's attention to the sinful mouth that stretched in a wicked smile. In the next instance, the tight ring of Slater's lips fastened around the barely visible circumcision scar, and a painful suction made Talha grind his teeth.

Not willing to play yet another one of Slater's games, he raised his palm to hit him, but the cruel mouth had already released its deadly grip and was now soothing the pain with long, soft kisses. Slowly, gently, then hard and passionate, lick by lick Slater's galvanizing caresses electrified Talha's body, until every nerve buzzed and trembled with electricity seeking discharge. Unable to control his urges, Talha fastened both hands on the back of Slater's head and thrust himself deeper into the twitching throat.

Slater's shoulders heaved as he gulped saliva down with his eyes squeezed shut. Short, fast spasms jolted through his frame, threatening to turn into vomiting, but instead of pulling back, he pressed forward, welcoming Talha's orgasm with a few swallows.

The room blurred before Talha's eyes. The surroundings shattered, swayed, and he gripped Slater's shoulder to maintain his balance. Holding himself in the heat of Slater's mouth for another moment, he withdrew. His heart leaped into his throat.

Slater's almost black lips parted, glistening with saliva and cum, that trickled down his chin. Long, clumped lashes trembled, and every time he blinked, clear drops escaped his eyes and painted lines down unshaven cheeks.

Examining the face, colored with fists and arousal, Talha wondered how he tasted without being poisoned with the acrid smoke of weed or force-fed wine.

"Swallow," he ordered, and Slater instantly obliged.

Unable to resist a pull as strong as gravity, Talha leaned forward, wiped the excessive moisture off Slater's bristled chin with the back of his hand, before crashing their mouths together. His palm outlined Slater's face, then clasped the back of his head. His demanding tongue slipped into the mouth, tasted the pungent mix of cum and blood.

Blue eyes shot open, and Talha squeezed his own, wondering if he'd just signed his death warrant. To his surprise, Slater didn't pull away but leaned in, allowing the kiss to deepen. Not wanting to think, Talha let himself drown in the sweetness of Slater's mouth. Savoring the rare moment, he enjoyed the slow, lazy responses of Slater's tongue and shaky, uncertain breathing reverberating against his own throat.

Head swirling with oxygen deprivation, Talha drew back, then froze watching the metamorphosis on Slater's face. The haze of arousal evaporated from the icy-blue eyes, substituted by a devilish glow.

*Fuck...*

"What was that, Master?" The inquisitive note in Slater's jittery voice kicked Talha out of his heightened state, and before his reaper said something else, something unforgivable, Talha back-handed him, sending him back to the floor.

"Shut up." Shaking the mist of euphoria, Talha pronounced every word as clear as he could while zipping his pants. "Tonight, you will only talk when you are spoken to. Understand?"

The reaper didn't reply, so Talha said, "I'm going to ask again, Slater. Did you go to London that night?"

Slater peered up, but instantly dropped his chin, hiding his eyes behind long lashes. Squatting by his side, Talha fisted his hair, forcing eye contact.

“Answer me.”

Full lips pressed together before stretching in a razor-sharp smile. “Yes.”

“Why did you disobey me? Did someone tell you to come back?”

“No one told Slater.”

The question ‘Did you betray me?’ burned Talha’s tongue, but he swallowed it. *No, Slater wouldn’t... There’s nothing in the world anyone could offer to win his loyalty.* Unable to find the reason for disobedience, he asked, “Why?”

“Because Slater wanted to.” The dry words washed Talha in the coppery smell of blood.

“Is that so...” Taking a deep breath, Talha straightened up and cracked his finger joints. “Then I shall punish you so you don’t repeat this mistake ever again.”

Pulling back, he crashed his fist down onto the handsome face of his assassin.



**LYING ON HIS SIDE**, Slater's body shook, as poignant sensation flowed through his veins, making him high. The power his master emitted messed with his mind. He lifted his upper body wanting to see the liquid amber of Talha's eyes, but another slap whipped his head to the side, infusing a new dose of metallic taste into his mouth.

"I didn't say you could look up, did I?" The measured voice sent a shiver down Slater's body.

"Master..."

"Shut up."

Out of the corner of his eye, Slater saw a flicker of leather glinting under the soft light. Acute pain bloomed under his ribs as Talha's shoe connected with his chest. Air left his lungs, folding him into a fetal position. Forearms pressed to the soft carpet, he clung to his shattered vision, attempting to stop it from failing.

"Speak only if I tell you to."

Gasping for air, Slater grabbed Talha's ankle with both hands, postponing the next strike. Breathing in and out, he tried to contain the pulsing pain in his ribs that slowly transferred to his pounding head. He scooted up wanting to get onto his knees, but a ringing blow to the middle of his back from above sent him to the floor. His cheek kissed the soft texture of the red and white carpet.

"I'll stop when you tell me the truth." The voice sank deep into his consciousness, demanded he answer. "Why did you go to London instead of returning to Istanbul, as I ordered?"

Licking his bloody lips, Slater smiled, then linked his eyes with the dilated pupils of his master.

*Master is so beautiful, so cold.* The heavy clouds of power Talha emitted, cocooned him, making Slater feel warm, protected, safe, so he confessed. "I wanted to see Master..."

"Why?" Talha pressed.

"I missed Master." Slater brushed his cheek against Talha's shin. Leaning toward his foot, he kissed his black shoe.

"Is that so..." Something odd lurked behind Master's voice, something that clenched Slater's stomach and stopped his heartbeat. Concentrating, he replayed the intonation in his head, but the meaning eluded him.

*Is Master mad?* Digging his fingernails into the carpet pile, Slater strained his ears and tried to remember the last time Talha was

angry to compare the emotion but couldn't. It'd been a while since Master raised his voice. Lately, no matter how hard Slater tried, he never managed to make Talha lose his self-control. That was frustrating. Even the punishments Master delivered had been measured, controlled, cold-blooded. The bruises Master gave him never stayed longer than a few days, often making Slater feel like it wasn't enough.

“Look up.”

Slater slowly raised his chin, expecting another blow to come any moment. It didn't.

“Master?” His voice trembled with a deep, primeval need. Slater hoped that Talha would understand and help him. Only Master could hush the pain in his chest and calm him down. And Master did.

“Strip...”

The air hitched in Slater's lungs as the order wormed under his skin. Hands trembling, he peeled the hoodie off, and cast it aside. His fingers struggled with the belt, undid the button. He jumped to his feet, pushed his jeans down along with his underwear, and fell to his knees. A heavy wall of arousal rushed from his lower belly up to his chest. Flooding his head, it wiped all thoughts from his mind, leaving only desire behind.

Stealing a glance up, he saw Talha's face softening with a hint of arousal.

*Yes, Master, yes...* He held his breath, when a cold shoe sole pressed to his shoulder, slid down his chest, and rubbed his nipple, leaving behind a burning trail. Pain and pleasure tightened his spine, making him thrust his chest forward, embracing everything Talha was willing to give. Every cell in his body begged, falling apart with the overwhelming mix of sensations. *Yes, look at me...*

Talha's foot slid down his belly, pressed to his lower abdomen, and inched down to his painfully hard cock.

“Arghhhh...” Squeezing his teeth together, Slater groaned, every muscle tensed, absorbing the pain. Small, rickety breaths pulsed from his mouth, and for a heartbeat, he was sure he'd cum. The room swam in front of his eyes. Leaning forward, he rested his forehead on Talha's knee, drowning in the sensation. The pain intensified, crushing his balls, and he whimpered. Licking Talha's black pants, he shot a glance up. His heart skipped a beat, then

leaped forward, crashing against his ribs as his eyes connected with a gaze full of undisguised lust. The same maddening lust that made him lean forward and press his flat tongue against the bulge of Talha's pants.

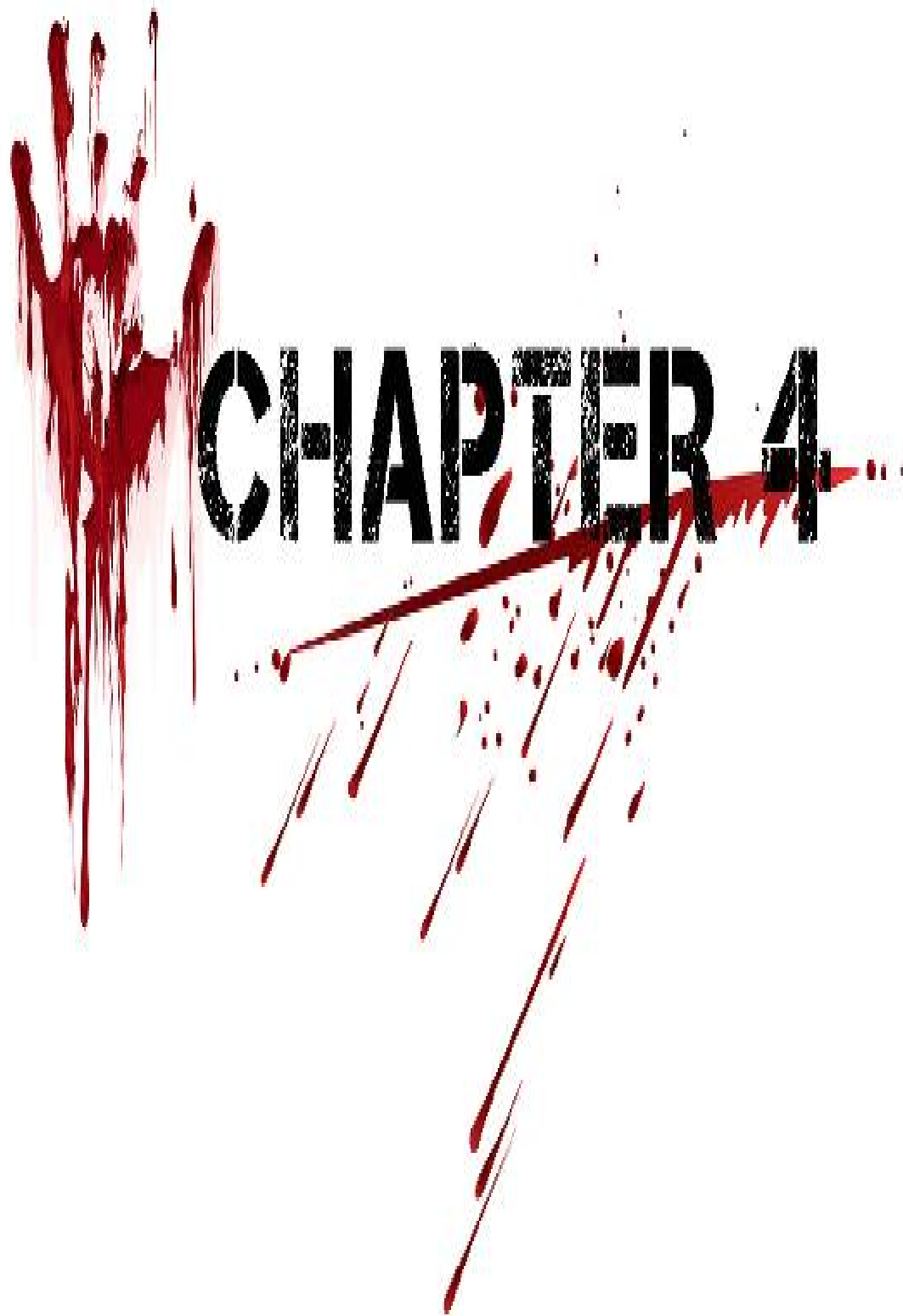
*Yes, Master. No one but me...*

“Turn around. Face to the ground, ass up.”

“Master...” His pathetic, needy moan resounded in his ears as he rushed to obey. His cheek pressed to the fluffy carpet then froze, waiting for Talha to continue.



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**TALHA'S HEAD SWIRLED,** as he ogled the round globes that moved up and down, as the small of Slater's back contracted with the primal need. With every sway, his ass provided Talha with a



perfect view of the tight, pink hole, whitened cane scars, and clean-shaved balls, that drew up with a building orgasm.

Unable to resist the urge to touch Slater's skin, Talha leaned forward.

**SLAP.** His palm connected with the right butt-cheek, making the younger man flinch, then moan.

"What was it that you wanted so bad that you came back, Slater? My cock?"

"Yes, Master."

"Huh? So fucking needy..."

Cheek pressed to the carpet, Slater begged, placing his knees wide apart, giving Talha a better view. "Hurt me, Master."

"Do you deserve it?"

Slater squirmed. His back, covered with thick whip scars, tensed. His ass lowered, and he admitted, "No?"

"Then why should I please you?" Talha groaned inwardly, knowing his voice betrayed his bluff.

"Slater would do anything for Master..." Even knowing that the reaper had said this because it worked last time, and he probably figured out that it was what Talha wanted to hear, he couldn't help feeling happy.

"Really?" The tip of Talha's shoe gently outlined Slater's balls, before giving them a light kick. "Ass up."

The spine arched as Slater sucked in air before letting out a shaky breath. "More, Master..."

"So needy..." Talha's foot moved under Slater's hips, rubbed the cock; when he drew back clear drops of arousal glistened all over the black leather. "I only teased you a little, and you're already leaking."

With a deliberate roughness, he wiped the precum off his shoe against Slater's balls. The sole pressed to the taint. Smearing the liquid up, Talha rubbed the moisture into the twitching entrance; the harsh movement extracted a tiny noise from Slater's chest. Reaching Talha's ears, it messed with his self-control. Weak with arousal, his reaper proved irresistible.

Wanting to hear more, Talha pressed harder, watching the creased skin comply and stretch, adjusting. The scarred butt

shuddered, pushed back, and Talha withdrew. A groan of disappointment cut through the room.

“How much do you want to cum, Slater?” Mesmerized by the crisp, visual contrast of the black leather against olive skin, he glided his shoe up and down Slater’s inner thigh.

“Please, Master...”

“So, here is your punishment, Slater.” Shoulders tensed, the reaper turned his ear to Talha. “I’m going to enjoy your body, but you won’t cum tonight. If you do, I don’t want to see you ever again. No matter what I do, you aren’t allowed to fight me.”

“No, Master. Impossible...” The half-plea, half-cry, tearing out from Slater’s throat, brought a smile to Talha’s lips.

*It’s going to be fun...* he thought, but said something completely different. “Yes, Slater. If you want to stay with me, you have to follow my orders. Prove your loyalty or leave now. What would it be?”



**SITTING ON THE BED** with his back resting against the pillows, Talha, engrossed in reading, flipped one page after another. Soft whimpers, coming from his left, grew needier and louder, throwing him off every now and then. When the vibration of the bed merged

with the prolonged, high-pitched moans, he granted Slater his attention. Gagged, chained, blindfolded, the ripper lay on his side whimpering. His head tossed on the pillow spurting sweat about the bedsheets. Clinking metal further disturbed Talha's peace as the linked wrist and ankle restraints Slater wore shook with pressure. Red skin on his chest glistened. Reflecting the light, it rose and fell with the rapid rhythm of his shallow breathing.

Short, fast, needy sounds from under the gag preceded a long, desperate groan, informed Talha of Slater's inability to subdue the upcoming orgasm. Grabbing the remote, he switched the vibrating butt plug off for the third time tonight.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" Talha murmured and licked his finger. Pressing his left palm to the mattress by Slater's chest, he stretched out his other hand and brushed his finger over the tip of the drenched cock. The blade of his nail dug into the slit.

Slater shook his head, moaning and growling. His hips jolted, shuffled away in a weak attempt to escape the touch, and a half-cry broke free from his throat.

"Wanna cum?"

"Ungh..." A frantic headshake awakened a cruel desire in Talha to push the ripper further.

"I can't understand you." Leaning closer, Talha hovered over Slater's cock, then blew a drop of precum off the tip. Shimmering, it dripped down, merging with the sticky mess pooling on the bedsheets.

Needy panting was music to Talha's ears. Wanting to hear more, he pressed his fingers to the thick blue vein in the ripper's groin and trailed upwards. Circling the navel, he outlined the rigid relief of his upper belly and chest, until he reached the reddened skin of Slater's neck. A thumb, brushing against the silicone ball gag, wiped dripping saliva off the corner of Slater's mouth. Catching the buckle, he removed the gag.

"No. No. No." Again and again, Slater's mouth repeated the word, as if saying it helped him to subdue his urges. Whipping his head from side to side, he gasped for air. Sweat, beading on his skin, painted the linens a darker gray. "Slater can do this. Slater will prove..."

"Are you sure? You look like you're in pain." Propping himself on an elbow, Talha pressed his palm to Slater's chest, feeling

for the chaotic drumming of his heart.

The raw smell of arousal and sweat screwed with Talha's head. Messed up, flustered, on the edge of insanity, Slater was weak, powerless, and alluring. Gaze fixated on the parted lips, Talha brushed long fingers over his own mouth, reanimating the memory of the kiss. He already missed the taste of Slater's lips and their softness. Shaking his head, he reached behind Slater's head and unfastened the blindfold before he made even more mistakes tonight. "Better?"

Red, swollen eyes squinted under the soft light, scrutinizing him with an obscure, destitute look. Unable to resist the urge, Talha brushed the back of his index finger against a feverish eyelid; it trembled under his touch.

"No..." Dodging the contact, Slater whipped his head to the side, wiping his face against the pillow. "Slater can take everything. Slater is strong. Slater can do this," he spat out fast words, clenching his teeth. "Master can't win. Slater will stay... There is no escape, Master."

Arrogant. Daring. Bold. Slater was everything Talha didn't want him to be.

"Is that so?" Slater's sobering words brought cruel notes to Talha's tone. "Then, maybe I shouldn't hold back."

An acute need to teach the reaper a lesson clogged his veins. Slater had to understand, had to learn to submit. Pushing the reaper to his back, Talha got to his knees and blew a long path from Slater's neck down to his groin. The defiant look disappeared as Slater threw his head to the side and squeezed his eyes.

"No, no, no..." A half-groan, half-cry, tore out from Slater's throat as he thrashed with his whole body. "Master is so cruel..."

"Am I? Are you complaining?" Talha smirked, but his mood changed, and he added in a serious voice, "Do you want me to be kind and gentle with you? Do you want me to make you cum?"

Teeth clashing in the air, Slater growled, rolling his head until his searing glare met Talha's eyes. "No. Master can't..."

Talha sighed.

"Slater, you have to understand that Master can do anything he wants." Ignoring his own arousal, Talha licked his lips and clasped his mouth around the glistening pink head of Slater's cock.

Soft, slick, hot, it felt good on his tongue. Talha almost moaned as he squeezed it.

“No-o,” Slater cried out. His mouth froze open in a painful grimace, and his head snapped forward. A violent jolt shot through his body, tensing every muscle. Hot, salty-bitterness gushed out of his cock into Talha’s mouth.

“Oops,” Talha grinned. Swallowing, he gave Slater’s cock a few long licks, before pulling back. “My bad.”

Red spots dotted Slater’s shoulders and stomach, his pale eyes fixed on some invisible point. Disbelief twisted his features. His brows knitted together, as he shook his head and grounded out a single, “No.”

Talha froze, drinking in Slater’s emotions. This was the first time he’d seen Slater show an expression except contempt covered with a wicked smile, raw hunger, or mocking curiosity. Incapable of deep emotions, Slater was an uncontrollable knot of desires, stripped of guilt, remorse, and empathy. He took and took, never giving anything back.

*Then why?*

Wanting to see more, Talha said, “You came, Slater. What will you do now?”

In slow motion, Slater linked his watery eyes with Talha’s. His lips parted, trembled, and liquid words slithered out. “Master is cruel.”

His glare hardened, glinted with boiling frenzy. Slater jerked, trying to break the restraints. He rolled to his side, panting and growling, then jerked again. A strained voice full of hurt and disdain chilled the air as he spoke, “It means nothing. Even if Master doesn’t want Slater anymore, Slater won’t leave. There’s no escape, Master.”

A myriad of contradictory emotions prickled in Talha’s chest. Rolling to his throat, they closed his air passage, making it hard to breathe. Watching Slater’s face contort in desperation, he thought that if he pushed a little more, Slater would definitely cry. The darkest part of his soul burned with a need to see Slater’s face drenched with tears. However, instead of correcting Slater’s behavior, he whispered, “I don’t want to escape.”

Slater squinted, calming down. Using the moment, Talha trapped his elbow, tugging the younger man into his arms. “Come, let me take you.”



**LYING ON HIS BACK** on the cold, moist sheets, Talha lazily stroked Slater's flank with his fingertips. His chest still hurt from the blinding orgasm as he stared up at a ceiling drowning in darkness.

"Slater... Are you mad at me?" he whispered in the night. The younger man didn't move, but his skin prickled with goosebumps under Talha's touch. "Can we talk? Can you concentrate?"

The minutes stretched, but Slater said nothing. Talha heaved a sigh.

"About that woman—" He wasn't sure why he tried to explain himself. They weren't lovers; they weren't friends. Talha didn't carry illusions about Slater harboring feelings for him, except for his need for this weird, symbiotic relationship, but he still finished the line. "—It wasn't for pleasure. It was business."

Slater didn't move. His breathing remained soft and deep, barely audible. Talha wondered if he was indeed sleeping. Rolling to his side so he was face to face with Slater, Talha brushed the back of a finger against the swollen, fresh bruise at the corner of Slater's mouth. Hot and red, it pulsed under his touch. "You know, sometimes, I wish you were a little more normal. Sometimes, I want..." He cut his thought, smirked, then sucked in a deep breath.

“Never mind... I guess, if you sleep with the Devil, you can't expect to get out of Hell.”

The thin, blue vein rhythmically trembled on Slater's temple. Unable to resist, Talha pressed his mouth to it, then skimmed down and brushed his lips against Slater's in a featherweight kiss.

“Sleep.”

Rolling to the edge of the bed, Talha got up and left the room.



**SLATER'S EYES FLEW OPEN.** Master's words instilled uncertainty into his mind. With the uncertainty, a worm of a doubt awoke in his chest, pushing him upright.

“Master is weird...” His fingers brushed over his lips, remembering the gentleness of Talha's mouth. “Master kissed me.”

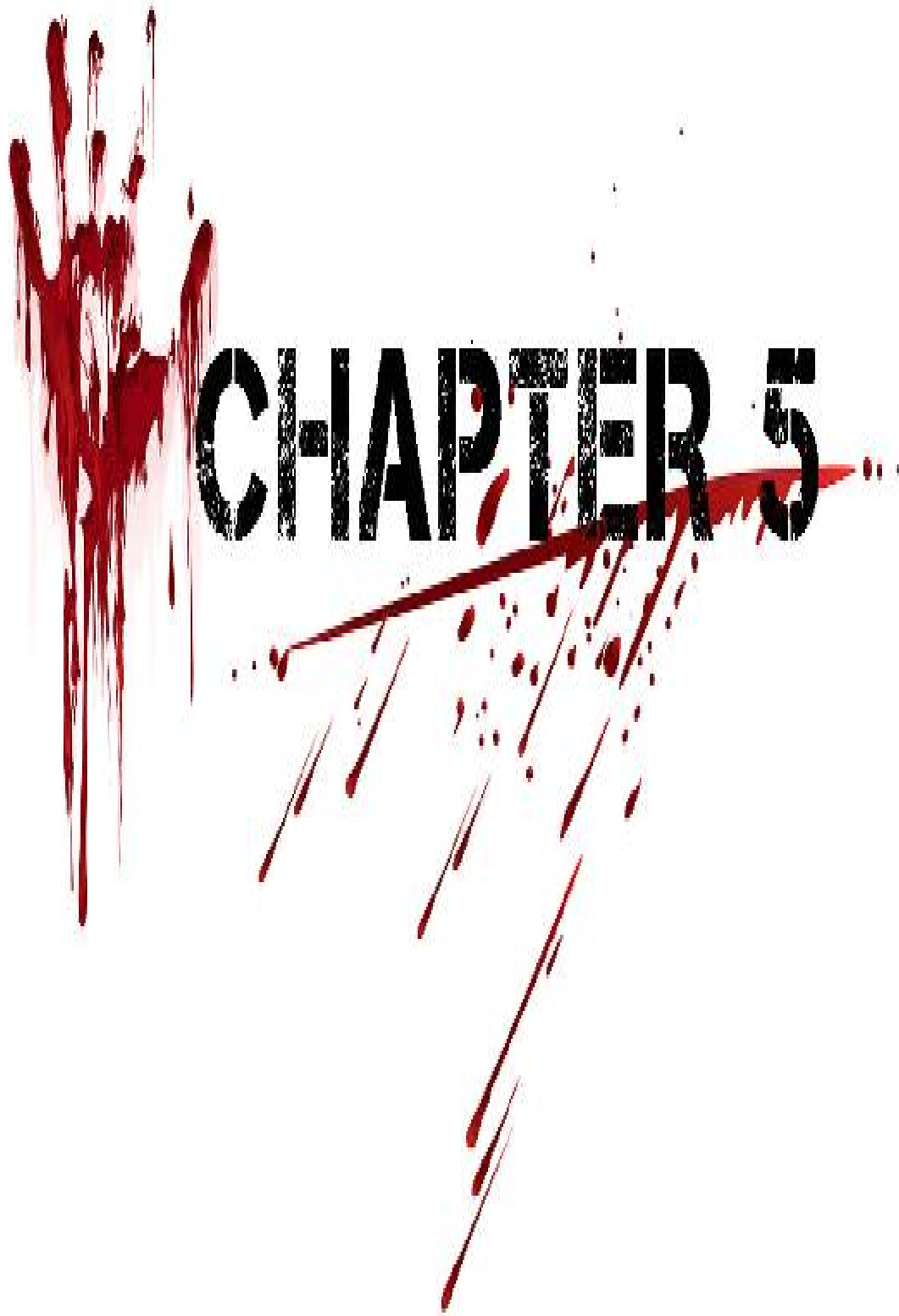
A smile stretched his lips as a pang of frost shot through his chest. Throwing the heavy blanket off, he placed his feet on the floor. Warm carpet bounced under his naked weight as he stood up.

“Interesting...”



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**SEARCHING ONE ROOM AFTER ANOTHER,** Slater ghosted through the house, looking for his master. His body still ached from the rough sex and Master's fists, turning his gait slow and clumsy. The whispers of the night, coming from every direction, messed

with his dulled, exhausted senses. Every now and then he had to stop and listen.

The carpet beneath his feet morphed into the cold, polished marble of the staircase, as Slater descended to the first floor. He froze again. The muffled voices grew louder, coming from a small living room located in the farthest end of the south wing. Following the sound, he took a right, slapping barefoot down the corridor.

“I don’t know...” Talha’s words, said in Turkish, slowed Slater’s steps. Halting in front of the door, he pressed his sweaty palms against the polished wood, unable to decide if he should walk in or leave.

“Listen...” Ejder’s quiet voice, coming through the speakers, made Slater strain his ears. Talha’s brother rarely called, unless it was something important. “I think it’s time for you to let go, Abi<sup>[3]</sup>. What do you think will happen when you bring a woman in? What will happen when you have kids? You can’t control him. Not anymore. The time will come when he’ll slice your throat and move on. Why do you even keep him? Anyone can be Iblīs.”

Slater’s eyes narrowed, the corner of his mouth twitched, but Master’s voice, calm and quiet, engulfed him in the next second, warming him. “No. Slater is my power, my strength. No one can be Iblīs but him.”

“What are you saying, Abi? It’s all in the past. He was your power, but you never use him, unless it’s to kill some weak fuck. Where was he last week when we had an incident with the Kılıç group? We lost five people. Where has he been? He could have done it all alone, yet he wasn’t there. Five people died because he wasn’t there.” Pointy, accusing words echoed in the silence. Slater scowled, hearing about this for the first time. Last week had been boring and dull. He’d spent most of it in the basement, chained and gagged, because Master hadn’t had time for him. The fire of irritation licked his heart. *Why didn’t Master use me? Why did Master lock me away?*

“I didn’t want him there,” Talha unwillingly admitted. Slater pressed his ear to the door to catch the small tale-telling vibrations in his master’s voice.

“You didn’t want him there?” Ejder repeated, stretching the vowels. “Abi, he isn’t your lover. He is your weapon. And now five people died because you didn’t want him to get hurt? He is here to die for you, not the other way around.”

*Master didn't want me to get hurt? Does Master think I'm weak? Does Master doubt me?*

“Slater isn't cannon fodder. He's an executioner, not a soldier.” Master's calm voice provided a clear image of the warm glow of Talha's amber eyes, his long limbs, stretched out in a relaxed posture, and his polished nails trailing the rough line of his dry lips. “I don't want him to kill too often unless it's needed. Once he starts killing, it's hard for him to stop. He enjoys it too much.”

“Then don't make him stop. We have lots of enemies. Feed him.” Slater side-nodded, clicking the received information in place. *If Master doesn't want me to kill, why does he need Iblīs?*

“You don't understand.” Talha brushed his brother off, and Slater wondered if he'd flicked his wrist in the air in a lazy, dismissive movement. “He is supposed to deliver a message, not drown everything in blood.”

That made sense, but the messages he delivered had thinned to almost nothing. If there were no messages, and Master had enemies, Slater didn't mind being a soldier. Anything was better than sitting in the basement and waiting for Master to return.

“Oh, I think I understand.” Ejder's tone picked up edgy notes. “You are scared that he will develop a taste for freedom and one day won't return to you.”

“You talk too much, Kardeşim<sup>[4]</sup>.” Annoyance, seeping into the harsh reply, scratched Slater's insides with a suspicion that Ejder had hit the truth.

“You are wrong in the head. You sold your soul to the Devil.”

Silence. Running out of patience, Slater placed his palm on the door handle, intending to walk in, when Talha chuckled, “That I did.”

“Do you regret it?” Ejder's question, as if heating all the metal objects around, seared Slater's fingers, making him yank his hand away from the bronze handle. “I've always been curious.”

Slater's face hardened. The air felt trapped in his lungs as his heart rate dropped. Seconds ticked by, but Master didn't reply. *Does he?* Slater shifted, one hand clasped the other, a thumb brushed over the burn. Pressing on the blister, he listened for the pain to rush up his bones, and diffuse in his heart, bringing him slight relief. *No. Master wouldn't.*

“Sometimes...”

Slater flinched. The word seared him with freezing fire. He rubbed the burn harder until acute pain suffused his whole being, helping him to contain his emotions. The sticky surface tightened, bouncing under his thumb, then broke. Spilling some liquid, it revealed the reddish surface beneath, but he kept scraping the damaged area, welcoming the first flame of awakening anger that sparked in his stomach.

“Why don’t you walk away then?” Ejder asked. Talha’s clear, rollicking laughter resounded in the night, messing with Slater’s head, confusing him further.

“There is no walking away. If you deal with the Devil you have to be ready to pay with your life. I knew it from the first moment I saw him.” Talha’s residual chuckles diffused in the night. “But if things were repeated, I would do it all over again.”

Slater let his hand fall. The rudiments of anger died out as the comforting words reached his ears. The urge to storm into the room and press his cheek to his master’s knee wiped clean his thoughts, but something stopped him from entering. Staring at the handle, he hesitated. *Master is confusing...*

“You are sick, Abi. He poisoned your mind,” Ejder concluded. “You can’t control him. Chip him if you don’t want to get rid of him. We should at least know where he is.”

“He isn’t a cow; he’s my Iblīs.” The proud notes, rebounding in Talha’s voice, lifted Slater’s chin. “I want him to be free. You can’t chip fire but you can choke it. There’s a reason why no one can control Iblīs unless he chooses his master. I want him to lick my hand, and for that, I’ll sell my soul over and over.”

Something twitched in Slater’s chest as he listened for Master’s voice. The amount of received information, sinking in, formed a billion questions that swarmed in his skull, awakening a severe headache.

“Okay... that I didn’t need to know.” Ejder brushed the topic away, jumping to another. “Have you told him about your wedding yet?”

*Wedding?*

“No... Not yet...” Talha groaned. “But Slater will understand?”

The hopeful notes in Master's voice brought a dissonance in Slater soul.

"Will he also understand that you traded him to her?" Ejder's barking laughter scratched Slater's ears, but his words sank deep into his mind. "He will kill you."

*Master did what? He couldn't believe his ears and shook his head. No... Master didn't. Ejder knows nothing. Iblīs is not for trade. Master wouldn't.*

"I'm not an idiot. He doesn't need to know." The invisible fist of Talha's words sledgehammered his solar plexus, pushing the air out of his lungs. "All he has to do is follow my orders, as always, and everything will be fine."

"He will kill you..."

"What can I do? Camilla wants him. And I want London," Talha stated. His heavy steps crossed the room, approaching. Slater shrunk back in the darkness, but the door didn't open. Instead, the pure clanging of a thin glass reached his ears a second before the sound of trickling liquid.

"You are such a good husband, Abi." Ejder's mocking words brought a foul taste into Slater's mouth.

*Have you submitted to a pussy, Master? Traded me for London... How weak.*

His hesitant hand landed on the handle, recoiled, then twitched again. Slater wanted to push the door open and confront Master, but a deep-seated hesitation, scratching in the pit of his stomach, forced him to step into the darkness. *Master will come to Slater. Then Master will have to explain. Slater will wait.*



**SITTING ON THE RIM OF THE STONE BANISTER,** Slater rocked his legs in the air. His fingers did a mechanical job of sending one piece of rose locum after another into his mouth. His master had been missing since morning, and Slater had nothing to do. Staying alone in the basement had been boring, so despite the promised punishment, he unlocked his restraints and let himself out, but the dull grayness in his soul didn't disperse. Quite the opposite, it darkened, thickened, and compressed into a stormy cloud.

*Master is getting married.* This thought, returning to him over and over, almost stripped him of appetite. He wasn't sure why it made him feel filthy, but every time it occurred, the acrid stench of disgust replaced the air in his lungs.

Maids sneaked behind him every now and then. Their wary glares tickled his senses, but he didn't pay attention. He needed to see Master, look him in the eye, and ask him why his chest burned.

The suffocating memory of the hotel suite and the white hand resting over Talha's torso replayed in his mind with torturous frequency, flooding him with a sticky loathing. Slater didn't know why he harbored such a strong feeling, as he had never been this agitated by anyone's existence before.

His cheek flinched as a sour taste spoiled the tender rose flavor in his mouth. Wanting to spit, he looked around. His bored gaze wandered over the carved walls, jumped to the polished, white marble floor until it stumbled over a tall sculpture of Venus. Heavy marble folds, draping her hips, left her upper torso exposed. A gentle line of her stomach, with a slightly visible relief of her abdominal muscles, emphasized the swells of her small breasts and a long neck that supported a perfectly proportional head. The roughly cut stumps where her arms once were caught the light.

Now, admiring Venus, Slater was sure, *the hand didn't belong...* but he wasn't able to finish his thought, as the heavy double doors of the main entrance flew open. Bright light flooded the cold marble hall. Golden arabesques, decorating walls, and the split staircase flared with colors. The sunlight trapped in the corridor of tall, heavily-framed mirrors, ricocheted all over the massive Moorish interior.

Stricken with curiosity, Slater squirmed, watching a massive shadow eclipsing the lights. The bull neck, sitting on the broad shoulders, made the bodyguard's head look small. Stomping in, Zaal faced the entrance and let six foreigners dressed in boring black suits into the mansion. Checking their surroundings, they tapped small devices connected to their ears with their fingers, constantly exchanging short messages with someone invisible.

Slater hummed. Picking up another piece of locum, he placed it on his tongue, then licked his sugary fingers. Someone spared him a glance, but their attention quickly moved on as the people spread through the mansion. He decided that there was no immediate danger.

"Please, come on in," Zaal said in rough English; his heavy accent scratched Slater's ears. The light streaming through the opened door flickered, and the slender silhouette of a woman appeared. She took a step forward, her red shoe passing the threshold. Slater swallowed the warning growl vibrating in his throat. Hatred stormed in his chest as his body moved on its own. Jumping down from the rail, he landed on the first floor; his right knee touched the soft carpet, absorbing the impact. The box of locum that had lain on his knees smashed against the ground, dusting the fluffy pile with sugar powder. He took a moment to stabilize the powerful jolt that stormed up his chest, to his head.

Swirling, Zaal put a hand on his gun. A warning flashed in his black eyes. "Geri çekil, köpek<sup>[5]</sup>!"

Ignoring him, Slater straightened and moved toward the woman. An overwhelming flowery smell wafting in, spiraled nausea in his stomach, but step by step, he kept approaching. Their gazes interlinked and for the first time, he was able to study her small turned-up nose, soft chin, and big, bright eyes illuminating her marble-like face. *So, this is what Master likes...*

“Who is that?” she asked in a tone that demanded an immediate answer. Her features curled up with curiosity, not fear.

“No one,” Zaal said, fidgeting. The sour smell of his discomfort tickled Slater’s predatory instincts. “Just a dog. Ignore him, Hanımım<sup>[6]</sup>.”

“Just a do-o-og?” she repeated, her coral lips parting in a smile.

*Don’t call her Hanım; she isn’t your mistress!* Slater suppressed a hiss. Irritation, bubbling in his stomach, rushed up his throat, urging him to make another small step, but Zaal’s large body rose in front of him, shielding the woman.

“Defol<sup>[7]</sup>!” Zaal warned, switching to Turkish, and reinforced the ‘go away’ order with a hand gesture. Pulling his gun out, he held it close to his hip so the woman wouldn’t notice.

Slater smirked as disdain corroded his blood. Zaal was only brave with a gun in his hand. *Whatever...* Pivoting, Slater stormed toward the bedroom, but Zaal’s bass stopped him in his tracks, syringing a new dose of abhorrence into his blood. “Not there, dog. Hanım is taking the master bedroom. You go to the basement.”

The invisible spring in his body shrieked with tension, transmitting waves of annoyance throughout his nerves. He spun on his heel and gave Zaal the once-over.

*You think too much of yourself. The woman doesn’t belong. Not here.* Granting the bodyguard a tight, promising smile, Slater decided that his patience with this man had reached its limit. *Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but you will pay for it... Master can’t protect you forever.*

Shaking the insult off, Slater strolled toward the rear door, wanting to slip into the garden, but the ringing voice of the woman stopped him in his tracks. “Wait.”

The karambit burned the small of his back. With every second, the pull of the steel grew stronger, but Slater knew Master didn’t like his home messy. He spun, meeting her piercing gaze.



“What’s your name?” The woman eyed him up and down, as if evaluating a property.

Slater didn’t reply.

“Hanımım, please don’t talk to him. He only followz Reis<sup>[8]</sup>’s orderz.”

“Really? Master’s only?” Her smile grew brighter as she drilled him with her tenacious eyes. She squared her shoulders, and her transparent white blouse stretched over her breasts. “Then you should serve me too. Bring the bags of your Mistress to the Master’s bedroom. I want to surprise Talha.”

“Surprise Master?” Slater cocked his head and responded to her smile. The spring in his body vibrated with pressure, ready to burst. “Certainly, Mistress-s.”

He stole a glance outside. Two men stood by the black jeep with darkened windows; a great number of suitcases gathered by the doors.

Ignoring the surprise and confusion written all over Zaal’s face, Slater picked up the nearest suitcase. “Follow me, Mistress-s.”

Two pairs of eyes burned the spot between his shoulder blades as he climbed the stairs. One—curious and impatient; the other—wary and full of mistrust.

Turning left, he strolled to the farthest end of the corridor and jammed a carved, wooden door open. The intense smell of oils surrounded him, instantly calming him. Drenched in bitter almond and leather, with soft notes of nutmeg, the vast, dark bedroom smelled like home, like Master’s skin.

“Why does it smell like cyanide here?” the woman whispered, following him in. Her gaze traveled up and down the tall carved columns that separated a shisha lounge from a sleeping area, then slowly grazed over the floor.

Trying to ignore her remark, Slater placed the suitcase on the mahogany floor, but the burning in his chest aggravated. Something ugly twitched in his heart, spurting venom in his blood.

This feeling was new. Slater had always killed for pleasure. The screams, the fear on his victims’ faces, the dying light in their eyes, everything gave him a thrill. He killed, obeying the law of the strongest, never thinking, never regretting. He chose Master for this reason. He despised many but never before had he loathed with such

passion. Everything about this woman, from her shiny platinum hair to her long nails, troubled him.

“It’s so dark in here,” she breathed, examining the golden walls, wooden arabesques, and Persian carpets. “This smell gives me a headache. Ask someone to open the windows, please.” Zaal nodded; she continued, “Change the linens, and I want a roast turkey for dinner.”

Her heels clattered against the floor as she ambled through the room, gawking but halted halfway, as the tip of her red, pointy shoe caught a Persian carpet. Vintage, as if beaten up with time, it had a grunge effect created by the nearly worn off red color.

“You...” she called, and Slater froze; only the corner of his mouth twitched, wanting to stretch into a predatory smile. “What’s your name again?” Never receiving the answer, she heaved a sigh. “Help me to remove this hideous carpet, okay? It looks so old and dirty...”

“That’s not dirt,” Slater corrected in a low voice. “That’s my blood...”

“Huh?” She tilted her head and scrunched her nose. “Come on, help me!”

Slater didn’t move. His memory trailed to the days when he’d started living with Master, but the carpet had already been there. He couldn’t imagine entering this bedroom and not seeing this carpet ever again. At nights, when he’d been bad and Master didn’t let him in the bed, Slater slept on this carpet. He wasn’t sure anymore if the red color was the original or painted with drops of his blood. He had kneeled and bled here so many times that he wouldn’t be able to count the occasions even if he tried.

*No, the woman doesn’t belong.* He squeezed his eyes as the spring in his body constricted and combusted. Unwrapping, it shredded the orders Master instilled in his mind along with the shades of humanity.

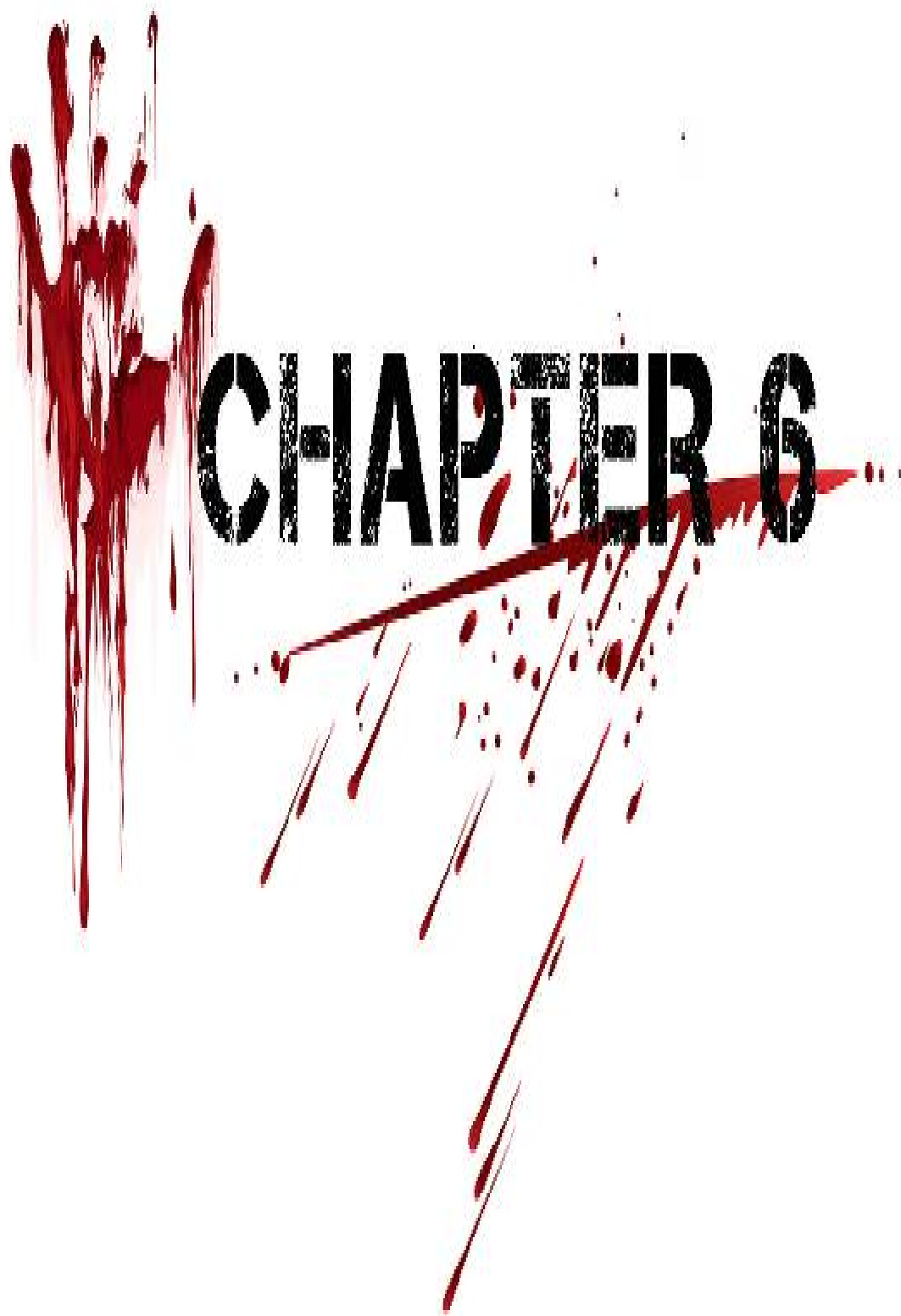
“You want to know my name?” He tilted his head, taking a small step in her direction. “It’s Iblīs.”

She gasped. Slater’s smile grew bigger.

“Let’s surprise Master, shall we?”



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**A SINGLE THREAD OF CHRISTMAS LIGHTS** stretched from the hall, drowning in the darkness, and up the massive staircase that split the mansion into two even halves. Wrapping around white

spindles, it twinkled with a mesmerizing golden light and disappeared in the right corridor.

Talha frowned, holding his breath. The windows stood draped over. No sound disturbed the suffocating silence, as if the night had already swallowed the world, except it wasn't even four.

*Where is everyone?* Hand on the holster, he inched forward, following the guiding lights. A thought about an attack crossed his mind, but he quickly dismissed it. *The Christmas lights and the closed drapes are too fucking elaborate for it... and bodies would be all over. If not an attack, then what? And where the fuck is Slater?*

Talha opened his mouth to call out, but something squished under his foot. A sour taste flooded his mouth, and the arctic frost of foreboding evil seized his chest. He lowered his gaze. A sticky, black, oily puddle marred the white marble under his sole. It stretched to the wall.

“What the hell?” he asked, and Hell answered.

“Welcome home, Master.” The soft, honeyed baritone tickled the back of his neck. Talha held his breath to still his leaping heart. As always, he hadn't heard Slater approach. Fast and silent, Slater was his personal ripper for a reason, and now Talha wondered if this time he would fall victim to his own weapon.

“What's going on, Slater?” Talha asked in an even, emotionless voice. His fingers released the cold steel of the gun. If his willpower wasn't enough to control Slater's demons, nothing would; the man had no respect for guns and even less for the people who used them.

A strong shoulder collided with Talha's in an intentional blow as the reaper passed him. Swaggering to the second floor, he turned right toward the Great Hall, but stalled, squinted over his shoulder, and smiled.

“It's Christmas, Master.” His hand slapped the wall, and more Christmas lights flashed out with colors decorating the entrance's arch.

Talha's heart fell at the sight of more blood. The puddles, big and frequent, spotted the floor; blood smudges stretched from every direction to the depth of the Great Hall, telling a horrific story of mass murder. Multiple bodies had been dragged through the graveyard his house had become.

Closing his eyes, Talha sought escape from the upcoming nightmare and the sickening stench of death that smashed against his face, confirming his suspicion. His foot landed on the last step, and he turned right, following the bloodstains that reflected the bright colors of the Christmas lights.

Slater's body never stilled. Strolling to and fro, as if the invisible forces demanded him to move, he circled Talha. Merging with shadows in one corner of the room, he reappeared from another.

"What Christmas, Slater? It's July," Talha finally managed a delayed reply.

"Hmm?" The ripper halted. Their gazes linked, and Talha noticed smudges of something black covering his face. Electricity lurked behind Slater's pupils as he granted him a conspiratorial smile. "What kind of a surprise would it be in December, Master?"

Talha tried to process the response, but failed. His focus shifted from the ripper to the vast space of the Grand Hall. Something tall and black stood in the dark corner on his right. Unable to make out the form, his gaze moved to the better lit areas. He squinted.

The long tables, forming a huge  $\Pi$  in the middle of the room, were draped with white tablecloths and dark table runners. Silverware and glasses glinted in the lights as the black silhouettes behind the tables, deformed with darkness, played tricks with his eyes creating the illusion of seated people.

*Not possible... Even if Slater slaughtered all the staff in the mansion, there are too many bodies.*

As if reading his thoughts, Slater approached him from behind. "Oh, Slater forgot, Hanım arrived today."

His eyes dried up, refusing to blink, and small tremors settled in his fingertips. Clenching his fists, Talha shook off the settling fear and stepped toward the main table; two tall, throne-like chairs stood empty behind it, bringing Talha a slight hope that Slater had spared Camilla. But with every step, with every small detail he absorbed, the hope withered, decayed, until it completely died.

Every glass on every table stood empty, except the two on the main table that brimmed with red liquid, and there, under a silver cover, the main entrée was presented.

Time stretched and slowed, intensifying the surrounding darkness. The air, swirling in Talha's lungs, condensed, making it

impossible to breathe. It had a metallic taste to it. Heartbeats, reverberating throughout his body, echoed in his fingertips when he trudged to the table. Every cell rebelled, yelling at him not to look, but his hand, acting on its own, landed on the cold silver and removed the cover.

For a second, staring into the white eyes of Zaal's severed head, he felt nothing, but in a flash, a wave of nausea clutched his stomach, as every small detail sank in. Well baked, brown skin crisped over Zaal's cheeks, glinting with cooking fat. His bushy brows and short eyelashes curled with heat but didn't burn unlike the wrinkled red apple stuffed in his mouth that still emitted light threads of steam.

"What have you done, Slater?" Through the thick fog of his failing hearing, he heard himself say. Not blinking, not breathing, he stared into the dead, colorless eyes, unable to collect his thoughts.

"Surprise, Master!" A click resounded in the empty space. Bright light struck Talha's eyes, making him squint and release the silver cover. Falling on the large plate, it jingled. "Aren't you happy?"

*This can't be real...* A smile of disbelief tickled the corners of his lips. His focus bounced from the split throat of one man to the slashed gut of another, then moved to a disfigured body he couldn't identify. *Slater wouldn't betray me like this...*

"Oh, sorry, Master. Slater forgot you don't eat pork."

Severed limbs, cooked and raw, were served on this cannibalistic feast. Dead bodies, mutilated, dismembered, were seated at the perfectly laid out tables, where the main dish was his butchered bodyguard. Guts and blood flooded the white marble floor that once wore a beautiful, silverish hue.

*All of them are men...* Talha noticed. Slater usually didn't find pleasure in killing women or children, finding them too boring and weak, so Talha asked, "That's a lot of cooking, Slater. Did you do this all by yourself?"

"No, Master," Slater's voice swelled with pride. "The maids helped."

"Where are the maids? Did you kill them too?"

"No. Basement." The ringing voice dulled with irritation, but then Slater added in a completely different, smooth and liquid tone, "Slater has a gift for you, Master."

Talha shook his head, unwilling to face the reaper. The words ‘Whatever you have, I don’t want it’ froze on his lips. Summoning all his willpower, he forced his facial muscles into submission and turned around, taking in the whole picture.

Blood. Blood. Blood. Red splashes covered the walls, tablecloths, and curtains, turning the sublime atmosphere of the majestic Grand Hall into the blood-curdling scene from Hell. A hopeless dread, sinking deep into his bones, froze his marrows. Every muscle aching, he wasn’t sure where to look. Fighting the itch to stick his fingers into his hair, Talha faced his ripper.

*If I can’t handle him, I’ll join them...*

Face covered in blood, Slater smiled and pointed at a tall Christmas tree. Only then did Talha noticed bloody guts decorating the branches and organs hanging on threads. A death grin twisted the pale lips of Camilla’s severed head as it adorned the top of the tree. Her opened, unfocused, muddy eyes didn’t sparkle anymore.

Talha had seen plenty of blood and death in his life, but this was Hell on Earth, and his own Iblīs had brought the flames of disaster upon his house.

“Sorry, I couldn’t find a star,” Slater offered in an unapologetic voice. When Talha said nothing, fearing his voice would break, the reaper’s mood shifted for the worse. His smile dimmed. He cocked his head and looked at Talha as if searching for signs of appreciation. Without finding any, he started pacing again.

Talha didn’t bother following him. If Slater wanted to kill him, he would have already been dead. Instead, his gaze traveled over a marble sculpture that stood by the Christmas tree. Small and delicate, pale and headless, it froze in the same posture as Venus. A tablecloth draped around her waist, hiding her nudity, and a few long javelins, stabbing through the flesh, fixed her body into the correct position.

“She is beautiful, isn’t she?” Slater’s low whisper tickled his ear, substituted Talha’s blood with ice. “You wanted to keep her, Master? Now you can.”

One hand clasped over Talha’s throat, the other arm entwined his waist, as Slater’s chin rested on his shoulder, washing his face in a sweet, rose aroma. The rapid beating of Slater’s heart drummed against Talha’s back.



There was no point in resisting. Raised in the Philippines, Slater was a skilled silat fighter trained not for sparring, but murder. Even in the best shape, Talha doubted he could win in fair combat. If he fought now, he would be dead within seconds. The only weapon he could rely on was his words.

“If you sleep with the Devil, you can’t expect to get out of Hell,” Slater repeated Talha’s words. “You traded me to a pussy, Master. You got weak.”

“No, Slater!” Pushing the order into his tone, Talha forced his way around to face his ripper, but the icy-blue eyes greeting him didn’t reflect any kindness.

Bringing a blood-covered finger to his full lips, Slater hushed, “Shhh...”

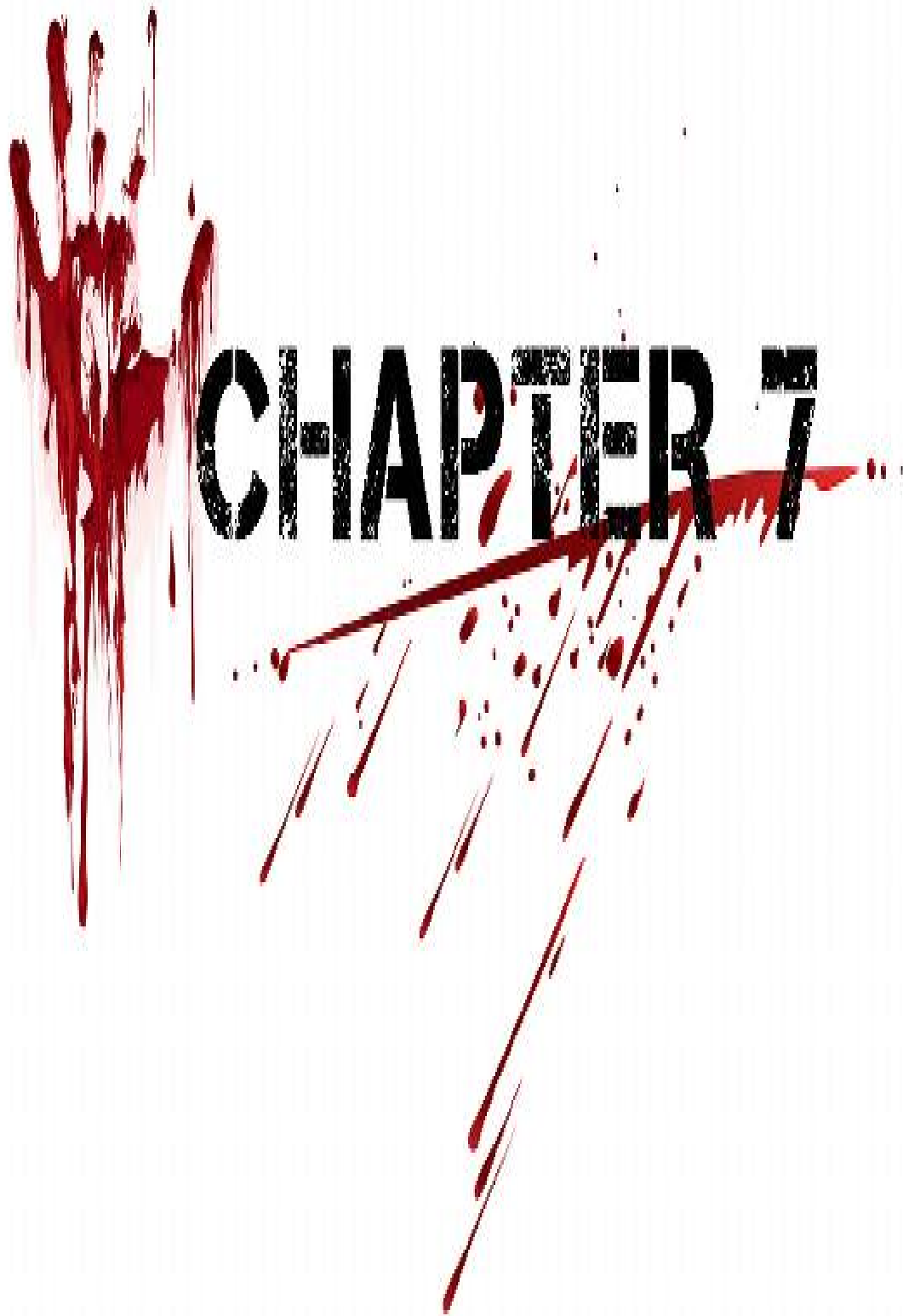
His hand shot forward. The iron clamps of his fingers squeezed Talha’s neck, and Slater’s sweet breath trembled on his lips.

“It’s Christmas, Talha. Make a wish.”

Something glinted in Slater’s hand. A needle stabbed into his throat and heat jolted through Talha’s veins. A bitter, medical taste deluged his mouth. He blinked with heavy lids, then again, but the bloody room drifted and dissolved into darkness.



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**THE BUMPY SURFACE** of the ground grazed Talha's back with every thrust. Something slick and heavy rubbed against his chest. Cool drops bombarded his skin and scattered down his cheeks and neck. Dull pain resounded throughout his body with every bump,

sending waves of nausea up his throat. Head rolling to the side, a groan of pain vibrated in his trachea and not finding the way out, crashed against his glued lips. He tried to swallow, but his tongue, taking all the space in his parched mouth, didn't respond.

"Oh, you are awake," the familiar, liquid voice sounded pleased. Talha forced his heavy eyelids open. "This is great. I don't think I can cum if you're not looking at me."

Slater's face, red and flustered, towered over him. Rivers of sweat trickled down his forehead and angular cheekbones. Gathering on his chin and the tip of his nose, they dripped down onto Talha's face. Up and down, Slater's body slicked against his. The constant motion aggravated his nausea, and Talha desperately wanted to tell him to stop, but his lips disobeyed, and only a muffled groan broke through.

"Yeah, that's so much better..." Slater whispered, and a crease formed between his brows. Torn breathing danced over Talha's face, as the electric gaze pierced his soul, making it impossible to look away.

Fighting the fog of confusion, Talha blinked, then again and again. With every second, his awareness returned, bringing to his attention a growing pain in his guts and dull numbness in his lower body. Breaking the spell of Slater's gaze, he looked down and winced. His stomach glistened with sweat. A black rope ringed his ankles, tying them tight to his thighs. Slater's hips smashed against his buttocks with every thrust of his body.

*What the hell?* He growled, granting the reaper a warning glare. He tried to open his mouth to tell Slater to fuck off but failed. His lips refused to move; something was stuck over his mouth.

*Fucker!* With his insides dull and bloated, legs numb, and back aching, Talha couldn't help wondering how long Slater had been doing this?

An acrid drop of Slater's sweat hit his eye, forcing him to blink and look away. Through the grayness of his muddy vision, he examined the red, uneven ceiling of the small dim chamber, then dragged his gaze down the ancient walls, until it stopped at the dull gray floor. Wiping his face off on his strained arm, he concentrated on his surroundings. His upper body was sprawled on the cold stone. Tight ropes, completing a few circles around his wrists, tied his arms to rings embedded into the two parallel walls.

Head whipping toward his rapist, Talha growled again, investing all the indignation he could muster into the glare, then he hurled his shoulders forward.

“It’s so hot inside you,” Slater said, ignoring him, then leaned in and brushed his lips over Talha’s mouth, surprising him for a second. The thin layer of what Talha assumed was duct tape, prevented their lips from joining. “I almost regret we didn’t do it sooner.”

“Ur-ghur!” Talha heaved again, suffocating under the sticky weight of his assaulter, but Slater only grinned in reply.

The medical afterglow muffled Talha’s thoughts and fuzzed the blood-curdling rage tightening his chest, but all his being itched to hit Slater’s smug face.

*How dare he? Who does he think he is to defile me like this?*

“Yes, look at me...” Slater exhaled; his face distorted with painful pleasure before he pulled out from Talha’s body with a wet, dirty sound. Shoving Talha’s legs aside, Slater shuffled up the rough ground on his knees, until his hips leveled with Talha’s face. Hand fisting in his prisoner’s hair, Slater yanked his head up.

Disrespected, drugged, raped; a supernova of boiling agony combusting in Talha’s chest. His wounded pride shredded his soul, demanding revenge. Eyes fixed on his rapist, Talha watched Slater’s palm clasp his leaking cock and give it a few strokes. Slater’s face contorted, unshaved chin moved to his naked shoulder. His teeth bared in a painful grimace a second before warm jizz hit Talha’s face.

A sticky mess dribbling down his brow and cheek settled a tremor of frenzy into his fingertips. Fists clenched, Talha threw himself forward, but the ropes, biting into his wrists, hurled him back.

Face softening, releasing the tension, Slater looked into his eyes, then grinned.

“Sorry, Master, I made a mess...” Sarcasm broke into his voice. Giving his softening cock a few more strokes, he squeezed the last drops out then licked his fingers. “I would ask you to clean me up with your tongue, but for that, I would have to ungag you...” Expression puzzled, Slater added, “Too bad I can’t do that, yet...”

A gentle palm brushed Talha’s damp hair away from his forehead, skidded down the sweaty cheek, then clasped the back of

his neck, lifting his head. Resting his elbow against the ground, Slater tucked one leg under his ass, the other pressed against Talha's side. He leaned closer. Their noses bumped, and the sweet smell of nougat invaded Talha's lungs. Unable to tell what kind of a game the ripper played, Talha froze as Slater's tongue pressed to his eye, smearing the sticky mess all over his cheek.

"Ugh..." Talha scowled. Glaring at Slater, he mentally drilled a silent order into his head. *Release me right now, you fucking Mutt, or I'll kill you!*

Hurt, thirsty, insulted, a storm of emotions brewed, threatening to form into something he might come to regret. Never in his life had he been this furious.

But Slater didn't seem to notice. Warm and wet, his tongue kept flicking over Talha's face removing the last drops of his passion.

The nasty noise of grinding teeth rattled in Talha's head as he drew back and granted Slater with a headbutt. The juicy sound of bone crashing against the cheek brought him a slight relief.

Slater's head whacked to the side. Surprise bled through his features, and a blizzard of confusion swirled behind his eyes. Rubbing his cheek, Slater recoiled leaving Talha's wet body unprotected from the drafts that sneaked from every corner.

"Oh, Master is mad." Slater poked his reddening cheek with a finger, then cocked his head listening to the pain. Aggression, coming from Slater's naked body in heavy waves, bounced against Talha's skin.

"Doesn't Slater excite you anymore?" Slater's cheek twitched, shoulders tensed, eyes narrowed, and he glanced down, confirming his words. "You can't even get hard... Master doesn't want Slater anymore, does he? Well then... can't be helped." Retreating, he grabbed the black backpack, undid a zipper, and shoved his hand inside. "Maybe Master wants Hanım? Sorry, I wasn't able to bring her whole."

Fingers fisted in the blood-tangled hair, he extracted Camilla's head.

**BA-DUMP.** Saliva flooded Talha's mouth.

**BA-DUMP.** He blinked, then again, but the illusion didn't dissolve.

**BA-DUMP.** The Christmas tree... The armless, headless Venus pierced by long spears... Zaal's baked head... And the image of Hell on Earth, Slater had created in his home, slammed back into his mind making him want to puke.

Heart choking with a maddening rush of blood, he stared at the unfocused, muddy eyes and gaping mouth frozen in a horrified grimace. A chemical mix of cortisol and adrenaline, flooding his system, cleared his head. Once again, he glanced up at the ropes binding his wrists, and then back at the severed head in Slater's hands. Sticky, cold fear crawled up his spine and into his consciousness, wetting his palms with perspiration. *Holy shit, Slater... What have you done..?*

"Do you want to kiss her?" Slater hissed, leaping forward. Camilla's head bouncing in his fist, he shoved it forward, almost imprinting it into Talha's face.

A mere inch apart with the dead head, Talha could see every pore on her skin, as the putrid stench washed over him. Pulling the restraints, he instinctively recoiled.

"No? Maybe you want to fuck her mouth?"

Hand darting down, Slater imprinted Camilla's face into Talha's groin, forcing the older man to twist and wriggle in an attempt to get away.

*What the fuck?* A bloody wave slammed against Talha's ears, drowning everything in a drawn-out, roaring noise. He yelled, 'enough!', but only a muffled groan escaped his throat.

"No? Did you grow tired of her already?" A vicious smile molded Slater's face into a demonic mask. "Or now that she is broken, you don't want her either?"

The smile, growing darker and wider, washed Talha in cold sweat. Releasing Camilla's hair, the reaper placed the head on the floor a few inches from Talha's face.

"You're so cruel, Master," Slater said, then shifted down, taking a position between his tied legs.

Talha watched Slater's palms land on either of his shins and caress his skin, but he didn't sense his touch. He concentrated, trying to feel the warmth of Slater's fingers, but his nerves remained silent. In confusion, he tried to move his toes but failed. The chilly breath of a new fear raised small hairs at Talha's nape. *How long have I been here?*

Anger, mixing with dread and a settling panic, shattered his self-control, and he yelled, *'Release me right fucking now!'* The duct tape blocked everything but his angry intonation.

"Your skin is so cold, Talha." Talha's heart stilled in his chest at the desert-like whisper of his name.

*Talha, not Master...* He looked up, trying to break through the icebergs of Slater's eyes, but no curiosity, no testing mockery, no devotion shone within. Stripped of all emotion, Slater's eyes reflected nothing.

"Your blood circulation had been cut off for too long. You can't even feel pain anymore, can you?" Talha dropped his focus to his legs again. Absorbing all lights, the edge of the black claw knife scratched the skin on his left calf; red beaded out at either side of the blade. "If you stay like this all night, the loss of circulation will progress to ischemia and maybe even gangrene. Should I leave you here with your beloved Hanım so you can rot together? You can stay with her till death do you part. Isn't it romantic, Talha? For such an occasion, I can even retrieve the remains of her body."

Word by word, Slater's speech seeped under Talha's skin, stripping him of all the illusions and hopes he didn't even know he'd harbored. The last dizziness the drugs instilled evaporated, clearing his mind, and the gravity of his situation dawned upon him.

*Slater abandoned me.* A painful lump in his throat prevented him from swallowing. The air burned his unfocused eyes, and all his muscles stiffened, as the realization blasted through his mind. *I will die here. This is the end.*

Many times, he had wondered how his life would end, but never in his darkest forecasts had he imagined such helplessness, such disgrace.

"Are you scared, Master?" The scorching words inflamed his ear washing Talha in a painfully familiar aroma of cloves and wood, mixed with the sweet scent of sugary treats. His skin prickled, sweat broke out, but he was unable to look away from the red brick wall.

*'Live a fast, colorful, fulfilling life without thinking how it'll end and have no regrets,'* this was Talha's motto. He'd always known he would die rather young, and most likely from Slater's hand, but a slow, agonizing death from thirst, gangrene, complete disability, and helplessness had never crossed his mind. The realization that a death reeking of pus, urine, and shit, where pride



was erased by disgrace and filth would be his end, instilled a mortal fear deep in his soul.

“Everyone has fears, right, Talha? You aren’t an exception. I can smell yours streaming in the air; such a potent mix of salt and sweetness.” Slater’s voice lost all liquidity, and for the first time was calm, mortifying. “Come on, tell me your fears. Beg me to spare you, and I might change my mind. Cry, Talha, cry because you are going to Hell.”

The sharp of the claw pressed to Talha’s temple and outlined the side of his face, stopping below his ear. Talha froze, waiting for icy cold steel to scald his skin.

*This is exactly what you want, right, Slater? You can’t leave... You want to see my disgrace, my downfall, don’t you? Enjoy every moment of your power, as you did with all your previous masters. And once your soul is free from my hold, you will be able to move on. If you didn’t need this, I would have been dead already.*

The blade trembled, dancing over the side of his neck, scratching and irritating his tender skin. One careless move and the blade would slash his carotid artery, making his death fast and painless, therefore unsatisfying for Slater.

Warm waves of calm and control, returning into his core, wiped his consciousness clean of all fears and confusion.

*I’m sorry, Slater. I’ll never release you. I’ll never let you forget me. I will forever remain your Master. The one whose orders you’ll follow even after my death. You’ll never move on. Only I can control your demons, no one else. You’re mine.*

Staring into the abyss of Slater’s dilated pupils, Talha shifted left. A sharp pain jolted down his neck as the blade cut through his skin. Slater flinched and drew the knife away from his victim, leaving behind burning pain and a warm, tickling stream of blood.

The cruel smile fell off the reaper’s face, replaced by a deep frown. Eyes dark and hard, he sheathed the knife behind his back.

“This is what you are scared of, Master,” he said, the liquid notes returned into his voice. He lurched in, and a warm tongue brushed over Talha’s neck, licking the wound clean. “Slater understands. Don’t worry, Master. Slater isn’t cruel. You will die from my hand.”

A rush of relief prickled Talha’s skin and released the tension from his body. For a moment, he believed Slater could leave him

here—tied up, alone with a rotting head—watching, feeling his body decay day by day. Exhaustion washed over. Head falling back onto the floor, Talha closed his eyes. His body ached, screaming for him to move, and he strained every muscle, trying to start the blood circulation in his limbs and move his toes.

The fire of Slater's lips stayed on his neck for another moment but soon retreated, leaving behind a wet, cooling spot. Two warm palms landed on his shoulders, traveled down his arms, entwined with his fingers, then instantly let go, jumping to his hips. Greedy and rough—almost possessively, almost painfully—the hand grasped his sides, squeezed his butt cheeks, then followed the zigzag of his tied legs, making Talha glance down.

Hands working fast, Slater unlaced the ropes around his legs. Talha groaned as blood streamed through his veins. Prickling, burning, buzzing, it inflamed every cell with the fire of life. Connecting the ends of the ropes to the second pair of the wall rings, Slater placed his hands on Talha's thighs, giving them a few light strokes.

“Well, then.” A smile returned to his face. “I bet you and Hanım have a lot to talk about. I'll leave you both to it.”

He withdrew, leaving behind only a small pull of gravity. Talha growled, then shook his head. Watching the younger man dress, he shouted and tested the ropes, frustration building up in his chest.

*You, son of a bitch! I'll kill you with my bare hands once I'm free!* He jerked forward, screaming for Slater to release him, but the duct tape turned his orders into pathetic growling.

The muscular abdomen had disappeared under a black hoodie as Slater straightened up and faced him. A razor-sharp smile sliced Talha's throat, cutting his breath. He had never seen so many emotions written over Slater's face, and never before had Slater's eyes shone with such hatred.

“Sleep tight, Master.” Heavy words echoed in the small chamber. The massive metal door opened, letting in dry, warm air. Slater said, “Happy wedding night,” before closing the door behind his back.

*No, wait!* Talha screamed, but his mouth never formed words, leaving them trembling in his trachea.



**HIS BODY SHOOK, TEETH CHATTERED,** and he desperately wanted to hug his middle to fight the night chill, but the evil ropes tightened around his wrists every time he moved. The annoying sound of trickling water, coming from behind the wall, intensified his thirst and the need to piss. His insides hurt, his back ached from lying in the same position, but the short restraints prevented him from rolling to his side. Occasionally he managed to half twist his body to the left, but refused to look right, fearing that the view of the rotting head would make him puke, and he would choke in his own vomit.

His mind roiled as the night progressed.

*Why didn't he kill me? What does he want? To kill me slowly? To insult me, destroy me? No, that isn't Slater. He would simply slice me piece by piece. This is too complicated for him. If he moved on, he wouldn't bother. Does it mean he's still with me?*

*'It's Christmas, Talha. Make a wish.'* The liquid voice resounded in his head, and Talha frowned. *He called me by my name. He intended to kill me... The two chairs with glasses full of... what was it, blood? They were for me and her. We were supposed to sit there. Slater wouldn't bother with meaningless decorations if he wasn't going to kill me. That was my last feast and his farewell. Then... Why did he stop? Why didn't he finish it?*

Unable to answer this question, he stared at the weak light making its way into the chamber through a grate embedded in the ceiling at the farthest end of the chamber. It appeared to be ancient and resembled a vent grille.

He'd seen red brick like this before. Old and long, with wide cement layers, red bricks had been widely used in architecture since the Byzantine Empire. They were also used to expand some of the under city catacombs. The subterranean noises of leaking water reassured him in his conclusion, but that barely helped him figure out his location. He could be anywhere in Istanbul, but the metal door in the chamber suggested that someone had already used this place as a hideout or prison. If Slater was familiar with this place, it probably belonged to his ex-master. This thought didn't help much, as Slater had never been good at sharing secrets, and Behçet had been the Reis of Istanbul.

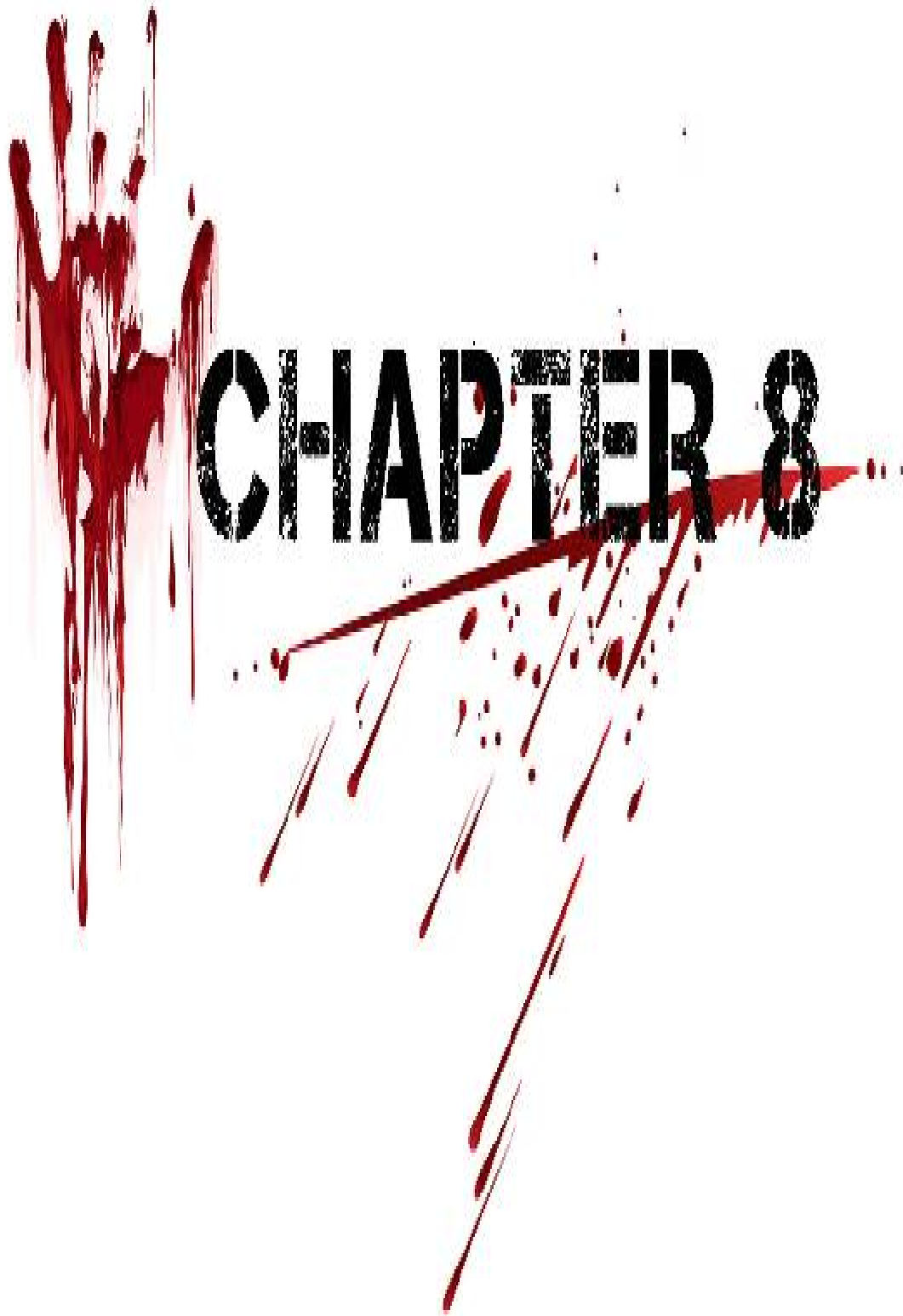
The night progressing, played tricks with his exhausted mind, and every passing second aggravated the haunting feeling that Camilla was glaring at him. Dead, immobile eyes drilled his temple, boring into his skull as if blaming him for what had happened to her. The howling wind, trapped in the catacombs, echoed his thoughts in a deadly voice, *"You will die here. Slater will not come. He abandoned you. He doesn't follow you anymore."*

At some point, he started to believe it. Since they bonded, Slater had never rebelled. He'd spun out of control a few times, but it'd been a while since his wrath had been directed at Talha. Constantly testing the limits, Slater pulled many tricks out of his sleeve to kick Talha out of his comfort zone and find his weaknesses, but he hadn't attacked him in ages.

During the endless night, Talha wrapped his fingers around the ropes multiple times and tried to break the wall rings out, but only managed to strip his forearms of skin. When the first gray light of the awakening sun sneaked into the chamber through the grate, Talha felt exhaustion taking its toll. His eyes grew heavy, lids closed, and a lucid dream washed over. Through a kaleidoscope of bright, swirling colors, Talha watched time twist, spin back, and stop at the moment he became the sole ruler of Mardin<sup>[9]</sup>.



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**5 YEARS AGO**

**STANDING AT THE TOP** of the rocky hill, Talha greedily sucked in the dry, heated air. The smell of sun and dust enveloped him.

Absorbing into his skin, it forever imprinted the scent of his homeland into his soul. The endless sky spilled a riot of colors across the horizon, turning cirrus clouds into watercolor smudges that surrounded the reddening disk of a tired sun. Lazy beams licked the ancient city, enchanting the golden stone buildings with pink and orange, and lavished warmth throughout the boundless Mesopotamian plains.

That was his home, his empire, his strength. Every day of his life, every road he chose, and every turn he took brought him here, to the top of the hill. He'd earned it with a low whisper of a knife, his spilled blood, his fingers covered with gunpowder, and his never-resting mind.

He remembered himself being little, living in a tiny, windowless room they had called home. The two cheap kilims<sup>[10]</sup> on the stone floor worked as prayer rugs when the sun was high and as their beds during long, hunger-torturing nights. His mother worked, but the money she made from cleaning other people's houses was never enough to keep them fed and dressed. Sometimes, when they didn't have food for days, and the neighbors couldn't help, his mother went out at night. The next day they always had food. On those days she never prayed. Talha had never asked where she'd gone. A fatherless family in Mardin, especially the one that ran away from their home, had little chance for a future. A woman, married by Imam<sup>[11]</sup> but not by law, held no official rights over her kids, therefore, she had no protection from the government. Even with a fake passport, she couldn't remarry fearing Allah wouldn't forgive polyandry. Talha had never blamed her, because he remembered his violent father, who whored his own wife out, and the broken ribs Talha received trying to defend her.

When Ejder started school, they only had one pair of shoes to share. They were too small for one and too big for another. Teachers didn't let barefoot kids into classes, so they had to split school days. On Ejder's school days, Talha scoured streets, looking for any kind of odd job. The legal ones hadn't come often for a twelve-year-old kid, so he'd taken everything that promised a meal. Pick-pocketing hadn't brought much money, so he started stealing mules, horses, goats, and camels. Rebranded and sometimes painted animals went to local smugglers, before disappearing forever from Mardin. More than often, he couldn't find an animal to steal, so he went to old cemeteries. Unattended graves with marble tombstones were the focus of his attention. Chiseling down names, he sanded stones before reselling them.

He was thirteen when his father burst into their home. Huge as a bear, Çelik raged about the room, calling his mother names and beating her bloody. Saliva bubbling at the corners of his mouth, he wrecked what little they had. Remembering what Çelik could do and understanding that they had a slim to none chances to win in a fair fight, Talha tried to persuade him to leave but failed.

Çelik whacking Ejder against the wall and called him ‘Orospu çocuğu<sup>[12]</sup>’, then hauling his mother toward the door by her hair was the last straw. Talha drew his knife. Without thinking, he jumped his father from behind and sliced Çelik’s throat before the man could reach the door. Towering over the quivering body, Talha watched his father die. Talha hadn’t felt any guilt or fear for committing a deadly sin. He’d only felt satisfaction.

After the last spasm died and the unfocused gaze froze on the ceiling, Talha’s mother brought a tin bucket brimming with water and washed away the blood before using a piece of cloth to bandage the dead throat. Ejder cried. He called Talha a murderer, and for the first time his mother slapped him, ordering him to keep quiet.

Hiding in the night, they transported the body to the local cemetery and buried it in a fresh grave, above the other body. The following night Talha couldn’t fall asleep, expecting the police to come any minute. No one came.

The next day, when Talha kneeled to pray, his mother touched his shoulder and calmly told him not to speak to Allah until he followed his path. Since that day, only Ejder prayed.

The event changed something in Talha. The man he’d feared all his life died from his hand, making him realize that no one was immortal, and no one was better than him. Also, that day taught him that his life belonged to him and only he could change it.

At fourteen, he entered the ultranationalist, neo-fascist organization, Gray Wolves. Their ideology of the superiority of the Turkish race didn’t hold his interest for long, but driven and ambitious, he understood the value of the connections he could make. He quickly sorted out the ones who fought for the idea and ones who sought profit. Looking much older than his years, he didn’t have a problem with people treating him as a kid and getting his voice heard. Flexible, he found the common language with both groups, and while the first helped him gain connections, the second brought him money. He orchestrated bribery, forgery, and sold information making him influential, and it paid well. His mother



didn't need to leave at night anymore, and Ejder transferred into the best school.

Watching people, he realized that desires ruled the world, and the one who understood people's goals and motivations held the power. At sixteen, he left Gray Wolves and joined the biggest criminal organization in Mardin—the Sayın Group. At first, it felt like a step back. Drug-smuggling, robbery, murder—he didn't get to choose. Small, dirty jobs became bigger, cleaner ones, as his reputation grew, his hands gained skills, and his body—muscles. At twenty-two, too many people had supported him for Talha to stay the second-in-command, so he took what belonged to him by the right of the strongest and became a new Reis of Mardin. His 'eyes' were everywhere, but it still took him too long to notice that his mother was suffering from leukemia.

His faith in Allah died with her, and with her, he lost his last fears, because fearing someone meant admitting their superiority. But in the godless journey his life became, he'd decided to never bow to merciless gods or human beings again.

Now he had everything. The Empire he'd built with hard work, blood, and sweat. The loyalty and support of his people and his brother. Yet, it wasn't enough. As soon as his foot stepped on the top of the hill, he understood—he merely took the step of an ant, who had reached the top of an anthill. Dressed in golden and brown, the immense space sprawled under the endless sky. There, beyond the horizon, under foreign stars, where people obeyed different rules and spoke different languages, he was still no one.

He stretched out his arm, causing the red eye of the sun to land on his palm. Hand forming a fist, he squished it in his fingers, and strong, intoxicating power flowed through his veins, installing the idea that his destiny lay somewhere beyond this land. As if echoing his thoughts, the suddenly awoken wind stirred his hair and breathed his name. Dragging it around, it guided him north-west, calling him to follow and repeating a low, barely audible, “Talha-a-a”. There, between two seas, where the Blue Mosque punctured the eternal sky with minaret spires, lay the Capital of Three Empires and his future—Istanbul.

Filling his lungs with the dry air, he closed his eyes and held his breath, wondering if he would ever inhale this air again.



**IT TOOK HIM THREE WEEKS** to gather his army. Many of his followers stayed in Mardin, but he had enough arms and men to enter Istanbul like a rightful heir and shatter its shady world with brute power. Having flexible morality, Talha feared no man, no god. His arms were open for all kinds of criminals, from drug dealers to murderers. His influence grew as his drugs and weapons flooded the streets. But even if he'd become the main competitor of the Asani Cartel—the largest criminal organization in Istanbul—Talha knew, he'd only begun his way toward the heart of Europe—London.

The long war with the Asani Cartel drowned streets with blood, exhausting their supply of bullets, money, and men, but it granted Talha control over the port and the ships, opening his road to the West. Making connections, he started shipping the guns and drugs from the Middle East to Europe. The more he earned, the more people joined him. Every time the Asani Cartel attempted to approach their boats they were greeted by a rain of bullets. Without access to open water, they withered, weakened, until finally, an envoy presented a proposition to Talha.

Behçet Asani—the leader of the Asani Cartel—offered Talha a merger.

The deal was simple. The Asani Cartel would move under the Demir Group. Splitting territories, they would keep their

business but, fairly pay Talha ‘taxes’. To bind the deal, Behçet Asani requested a meeting on neutral territory, under the watchful eye of Allah.



**“CHECK THE BUILDING!”** Giving a short order to his men, Talha stepped out of the car and checked his surroundings. *So quiet...* He almost believed he could hear the dust crisping under the roasting August sun. No birds chirped, no people hung around, but a black jeep parked by the main gates informed him that Behçet Asani had already arrived.

Resting his back against the car, Talha took in the reverential form of the once majestic building. The bright sun, flooding the streets, only accented the downtrodden appearance of the huge, red-stone mosque. Scarred walls, broken windows, and black moss crawling up the moist cavities, created a weirdly fascinating, post-apocalyptic feel.

“Clear. Only one man and a boy,” the reply resounded from within.

Talha checked his watch, then eyed Ejder. “Any news from Salik?”

“He is stuck in a traffic jam.” Black eyes, serious and smart, peered at him with a question. The stubborn line of his chapped lips

emphasized the heavy jaw that bulged with tension. At twenty-two, Ejder looked older, except for his eyes that always shimmered with child-like curiosity.

Without a word, Talha pointed his chin at the mosque, checked his gun, then strode toward the main entrance.

Worn, colorless carpets, that had once gracefully covered the floor throughout the building, now rotted from the high humidity. Some windows were boarded up, but the light still made its way through others that glinted with the remains of stained glass; it failed to fully illuminate the tall vaults of the ceiling. Ringing silence, like the one that numbed the air before a severe storm, added to the desolate atmosphere.

With no obvious reason, every hair on Talha's arms raised to attention. The same discomfort emitted from his people. Ejder's voice, coming from behind his shoulder, murmured, "I don't like it."

A teenage boy, no older than fifteen, dressed in black camouflage, appeared from behind a white square column and came up to Talha. His whiskey-colored eyes too serious on his child face. "Asani Bey<sup>[13]</sup> awaits you."

Suppressing the need to throw another glance at Ejder, Talha followed his lead, walking toward the old altar that was cloaked in shadows.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Reis." An adenoidal voice boomed in the space, shattering the heavy silence. Twisting in the air, it split into echoes of different intensity and assaulted him from every direction. Through the screen of swirling dust and crisscrossing sunbeams, Talha picked up a silhouette of a man sitting in a tall, massive chair that substituted for the altar. "Thank you for coming. It's an honor."

The man didn't get up, didn't offer Talha his hand. His face drowned in shadows, leaving only knotty fingers covered with heavy gold rings visible. They calmly rested on the black metal of an Uzi—a close-range submachine gun that worked best against a crowd.

Talha's cheek twitched in an unborn cringe. His mind blanked.

"Get back!" he yelled to his men. Shielding Ejder with his shoulder, he pushed him toward the exit, but the massive doors slammed closed. Grabbing his gun, he aimed at the sitting man.

The events made little sense to him. Even with the Uzi, Behçet was alone. They still had a chance. Talha's people already had him in their sights. The messenger boy was unarmed, but even if he had a gun too, he would have to target their heads because all of his people wore bullet-proof vests. However, Behçet didn't look like he intended to start a shootout. With unhurried and slow movements, he put the gun on the floor, got up, and cracked his neck.

"You are so stupid, Talha." His rusty, bass brimmed with arrogance as he stepped behind the chair and tugged the chain that hung from above. A low screeching of stone sliding against stone sounded as the man added, "You will die here. Lights!"

**THUD.** Something hit the ground to his left; the same sound reached him from his right in the next heartbeat. He twisted his neck, seeking the danger. Plastic shields, painted in the same texture as the inner walls of the mosque, fell from above. Crashing against the floor, they revealed several men standing behind low parapets by every unclosed window fifteen feet above the ground. They fixed night vision goggles over their eyes and released small strings connected to black fabric blinds. Falling, they choked the light, and impenetrable darkness swallowed everything, hitting Talha with a dagger of fear.

**FRRRRRRRAK. BANG. BANG. BANG.**

The crossfire drummed in his ears. Coming from every direction, it shattered the darkness as a rain of bullets sliced the air. Someone screamed, then again. Footfalls scattered about the vast space, multiplied by echoes, they messed with his senses. Disoriented and lost, he pushed Ejder backward, where he remembered the location of the nearest column. He couldn't tell if there were windows above the entrance, but he was sure the sound of the falling shields hadn't come from behind. Ejder, hitting the column first, tumbled, but the next moment his hand grasped Talha's shirt and pulled him back. Safe behind the square tapered column, Talha leaned against the cool stone and closed his eyes, listening.

Gunfire, screams, death rattles, and the loud clanging of bullets hitting stone inhabited the air. Twisted and distorted, the sounds entwined in a cacophony accentuated by the strong echo. No matter how hard he tried, he wasn't able to say from which direction the gunfire and dying screams came until everything quieted down.

*Sooner or later, we will run out of bullets, and they will put us down one by one, like fucking dogs.* The helplessness kicked him in the gut. Without thinking, he stuck his hand out from behind the

column and fired, aiming somewhere up and right where, if he remembered correctly, the nearest window was located. The instant return fire forced him to recoil, but the darkness thinned a fraction. Guided by a glowing dot, created by a bullet passing through the blinds, he sneaked another look, sending more bullets the same direction. Needles of light cut through the darkness. They weren't enough to illuminate the building, but his vision, adapting to the dark, made out his surroundings.

A rustle from the left preceded crossfire, informing him that at least two of his people had found a cover. Another gun joined them from the back, then one more from his right.

Ejder moved. A **BANG** rang out above Talha's ear, and a heavy **THUD**, coming from the depth of the mosque, suggested that his brother had hit a target. Peeking out, Talha inched the gun sight a fraction away from the riddled window, then shot. The darkness shattered and a hail of bullets bombarded the other side of the column. Shards of stone bit his face and shoulder, forcing him back. Ejder groaned, shuddered, and started to sink.

"No, no, no. Fuck!" Talha pleaded, fisting Ejder's shirt collar, he hauled him upright. His chest pressed against his brother's, supporting his weight as his hands groped Ejder's body. "Where?"

"My shoulder. I'm okay..." Ejder hissed, sucking in air.

Through the loud peals of weapons, Talha heard another body hitting the floor, and the fire pressure from his right weakened. His eyes, adapting further, picked up two shadows hiding behind the column on his left. From the distance, he wasn't able to make out their faces, but he felt their gazes upon himself.

Talha reloaded his gun then made a 'cover me' sign. Gunfire deluged the air and he inched right, squinting. Two human silhouettes, on either side of a window, bled through the gloom. Concentrating on the return fire, they didn't look at his direction. Aiming, he pulled the trigger. One man staggered and dropped his gun, grabbing his throat. He reached the ground the same moment as a barrage of lead hit the column.

Swallowing the dust, Talha leaned forward and pressed his forearms against the cold stone at either side of Ejder's head, shielding him from shards.

*How fucking stupid...* He winced; his shirt warming with blood that wasn't his. He growled as helplessness and a need to

crush something clenched his fists. *I should have never brought Ejder with me. He should have stayed in Mardin.*

“It will be okay,” he whispered to Ejder. “Hold on. I will fix it, I promise. I’m sorry for letting you down.”

Guilt gnawed at his heart, erasing his survival instincts. Pressing one palm against Ejder’s chest, he shoved his upper body from behind the column and pulled the trigger. The gun misfired.

**BANG!** Fire and ice scalded the right side of his head, blanking his vision. His ears rang. Trying to retain his balance, he sidestepped, hand flapping in the air, searching for anything to hold onto. Someone grabbed his arm and hauled him back. Confused, he shook his head. The bright spots in front of his eyes morphed into rainbow bubbles. Something trickled down his face, flooding his right eye. He lifted his hand, wanting to touch it, but swayed left.

His skull split into a hundred pieces, and a million little invisible legs pitter-pattered over his naked brain. But as soon as Ejder’s hands seized his head, the world glued together. “Abi?”

Talha blinked. His vision cleared.

“Give me your gun,” he said, slapping Ejder’s hand away from his face. The weapon changed hands. Once again, Talha signed to his people to cover him. Supporting Ejder with his shoulder, he tilted left, aimed and fired. The thunder of gunfire, coming from the left column, banged against the walls, making the remaining glass in the windows rattle. He fired again, aiming at the vague shadows, and soon everything went quiet.

Carefully, he unglued himself from the wet chest of his brother and peeped out. No movements caught his attention as he guided the gun sight from one window to another. Circling the column, he checked the rear part, before he slunk toward the altar.

Dead bodies lay on the floor by the walls and columns like broken dolls. Swallowing a lump in his throat, step by step, Talha stumbled to the altar.

**FRRRRRRRAK.** A red flash shattered the darkness. Gunfire roared in his ears as a hail of lead stuttered against his ribcage, pinning him to the ground. His heart choked with blood, and his guts tangled together. Unable to take a breath or exhale, he curled on his side and scratched alongside the bulletproof vest in an attempt to elevate the pain. His vision failed, then returned, concentrating on small dust particles that swirled in a single beam of

light from behind the altar. He blinked, trying to suck some air into his burning lungs, but his body rebelled against him, and he doubled over, spitting out the remaining oxygen.

A slender figure, dressed in a black camouflage suit, holding an Uzi on one hand, got up from the tall throne-like chair, and made the first step toward Talha. The military boots, slowly approaching, raised small clouds of dust every time a heavy sole hit the floor.

Talha tried to lift the gun, but his body wasn't functioning, and a paralyzing numbness prickled his fingertips. Blankly staring into the gloom, he watched the muzzle of the Uzi establish eye contact with him, as the boy granted him a lopsided smile.

“Allahismarladik<sup>[14]</sup>,” the boy said. A gunshot ripped through the silence and deafened Talha. The young face lost the wicked expression; mouth slacked, eyes unfocused, as his right cheek burst open. Knees buckled, and he toppled on the old, moldy carpet.

“Güle-güle<sup>[15]</sup>,” Dinçer, Talha's best friend and lieutenant, called from behind, making him relax in relief.

Someone kneeled by his side. Agile hands tore his shirt open and loosened his bulletproof vest. He rolled to his back, and air rushed into his lungs. His chest compressed. Unable to sustain the air, he spat it back, but his mouth kept gulping it. He squeezed his eyes and forced himself to sit up. The friendly hand patted his shoulder and his mind cleared.

“Ejder?” he called, rushing to his feet. The dull pain rebounded in his core from the impact point, and he rubbed his chest where the bullets had hit him. “Get the fucking light!”

Someone opened the door and a strong cascade of light sliced through the gloom, as the car drove up and stopped in the doorways. A new wave of gunshots reached him from the outside, but Talha didn't care. Rushing to his brother, he hauled him upright.

“Get him to the doctor. Collect our wounded and dead. We need to get out of here before the police arrive.” Talha shoved Ejder to Dinçer, before rushing toward the altar. Grabbing the chain that hung from the ceiling, he tugged. The floor at his feet moved, and a stone slab slid to the side revealing a hidden ladder.

Without thinking, he descended.

A string of electric lights illuminated a long corridor, leading one way. Dark, red brick walls and an arch of a ceiling emitted the strong smell of mold. Black spots above holes in the wall suggested



that before electricity, torches illuminated this place. Talha heard someone following behind him but didn't bother looking back. His attention was glued to the wooden door at the end of the passage.

Kicking the door open, he pointed the gun at the single figure present in the dungeon room. The fireplace glowed orange and illuminated the walls, a large wooden table that took up half the space in the room, and a huge map that sprawled on the wall opposite Talha. In the corner of his eye, he noticed some black deformed objects pinned to the continents, but they didn't grab his attention, as the blood drumming in his ears, demanded him to kill.

Something squeaked, rushing from under Talha's foot. Dropping his aim to the floor, he saw a huge gray rat galloping toward the wall before squeezing its fat body into a small hole.

Jerking his cheek, he raised the gun at the man again. Streams of sweat, reflecting the fire, rushed down his shirtless torso and the damp mess of his short black hair. The stranger didn't flinch, as if he didn't notice Talha's presence. Both of his arms were covered in something black up to his elbows, as he stood in front of the opposite wall, examining the map. Head tilting, he lifted one hand, squeezing something in his fist, then pressed the formless knot of something to the map where England lay. Lifting his foot, the man slid his other hand under the top of his military boot and fished out a long throwing knife.

A raspy breath, coming from behind, washed Talha's ears in heat. The airwave hit the side of his face, and a muzzle entered his field of vision.

The thin black metal of the throwing knife didn't reflect any light as the man raised his hand and pinned a formless object to the map. Confused, Talha inched forward, never losing the sight of the man, never lowering his gun. He saw Dinçer and a recruit, Emin, entering the room right after him; both held the man in their sights.

"Turn around," Talha ordered. "Hands in the air."

The man twisted his torso toward Talha then made a complete spin. Genuine surprise shot up his eyebrow and a corner of his mouth into an approximation of a smile. "Oh, you're alive. Interesting..."

Black stains, marring his face and chest, merged with crisp shadows that outlined the relief of his toned muscles. Talha took another step, scrutinizing his features. Full lips on a young, Caucasian face stretched further into a smile, as his glacial eyes

pierced Talha's soul. Despite standing under the threat of three guns, the man showed no signs of distress, quite the opposite; he looked in his domain—confident, relaxed, mildly curious. The maturity had already sharpened his jawline and his cheekbones, but his inquisitive, fearless gaze and smooth skin told Talha that he was in his early twenties. No matter how long Talha scanned his face, this wasn't Behçet Asani.

“Bism-m-millah<sup>[16]</sup>...” Emin stuttered. Talha scanned the body language of the thickset man. His gun trembled in his hand as his beady, always wet eyes stared at something on the floor lying behind the wide wooden table. “It's Iblīs...”

The atmosphere shifted in the room as a smile on the young, handsome face turned wicked. Iblīs took a step toward them. Lifting his finger to his mouth, he shushed, “Shhhh.”

“Iblīs?” Talha repeated. His heart, speeding up, sent boiling blood slamming against his face. Swallowing his excitement, he inched right. Approaching Emin, he circled the table and glanced down.

The body of Behçet Asani sprawled over the floor, his hands pinned to the carpet with throwing daggers as if crucified. His mouth gaped in a silent scream as his dead eyes bulged in horror. A long slice split his large, muscular body from solar plexus to groin. In the bloody wound, Talha saw the grayish mess of his guts, swimming in a pool of blood.

Emin's hands shook as he pointed his gun at Iblīs. His pupils dilated, lips whispering prayers, and his finger twitched over the trigger, ready to shoot the Devil. Sidestepping, Talha placed his hand over Emin's gun, lowering it. Meeting the fearful stare of a feral animal, Talha ordered, “Leave.”

Tucking Ejder's gun in the back of his belt, Talha took a small step toward the younger man with his open palms forward. Droplets of sweat glared on the toned body in reflected red and gold light from the fire. The blue eyes scrutinized his every move.

*He is barely older than Ejder. How can this be Iblīs?*

His memory leafed through all the information he had ever received on Iblīs but found nothing useful. People said that three years ago Behçet was no one. Brutal, but not smart, he lacked self-control and flexibility; therefore he had never reached high, remaining a small drug dealer with overly high ambitions. Things changed when he sold his soul to the Devil or so people said. Slicing

one throat after another, his personal ripper slaughtered every one of Behçet's enemies, leaving no witnesses behind. Soon after, people began to believe that the bloody ripper was indeed Iblīs—the evil jinn, created from the smokeless fire. It took Iblīs half a year to make the Asani Cartel the largest organization in Istanbul.

No one claimed to have seen Iblīs. No one had ever survived a meeting with him, or those who did had never talked about him. No one knew his age, so Talha had always assumed he had to be some sick old fuck. But this man was young, and his facial features were almost gentle. Tall and lean, he was beautiful, rather than scary. But the butchered body of Behçet, lying by his feet, spoke better than words. No doubt, this was Iblīs.

“Is that right?” Talha wasn't sure if he stated or asked. “You are Iblīs?”

The younger man didn't answer, but his full lips, drew up, revealing a perfect row of white teeth.

“Why did you kill Behçet? Wasn't he your master?”

“Why?” An agile voice, speaking in flawless Turkish, sent hundreds of goosebumps down Talha's back. Iblīs smirked, granting Behçet's body a glance full of contempt. “Behçet disappointed.”

“Disappointed?”

“Behçet got weak. Behçet was scared. The weak can't own Slater. Only the strong can.”

*Slater? Is that his name?*

The young man squatted down and his long, strong fingers touched the dead eye of his former master. Nails digging into the socket, he squeezed the eyeball between his fingers, then jerked his hand back. The sight of the torn blood vessels stretching in the air after Slater's fingers made Talha's stomach roil. A sour taste filled his mouth. Someone retched behind him. Horrified and mesmerized at once, he watched Iblīs pull out another throwing knife and pin the eye to the map, over New York.

Iblīs stepped back, giving his creation another look of appreciation. A liver, heart, adrenal gland, and part of a lung decorated the colorful paper, creating a horrifying design only pure evil and chaos could produce.

*'Weak can't own Slater. Only strong can.'* Iblīs' words looped in Talha's head, intoxicating his blood. For years, the name Iblīs

chilled the blood in people's veins. Merciless, bloody, the ripper of the Assani Cartel instilled wild, unconscious fear in the minds of Behçet's enemies. Iblīs alone was a great strength, a great power, making people believe 'the one who owned Iblīs owned the world'. At that moment, more than anything, Talha wanted to own this man.

"You have no master now, right? Be mine," he heard himself say. "I'll pay you double what you got from Behçet."

A beautiful head tilted to the side, informing Talha that Slater had heard.

"Are you insane?" Dinçer clutched his shoulder, but Talha pried his hand off with a shrug. "He slaughtered his master. Look at what he did! He's crazy."

Ignoring his friend, Talha added, "I want you. And I always get what I want."

Iblīs' head moved from the left tilt to the right before the younger man turned away from his map and faced Talha again; an uncertain smile played on his lips. "Huh?"

Slater inched forward, and Talha heard someone move behind his back.

"Dinçer, leave." The insanity of his actions syringed a massive dose of adrenaline into his blood, producing a weird, drug-like effect.

"But Talha..."

"Leave," he repeated, never breaking eye contact with the mesmerizing glint of the icy-blue irises. "If he kills me, no revenge should follow. This is my decision."

"Talha, huh..." The breath of a desert wrapped around Talha, making him feel home. The wind that guided him north-west spoke in the same low whisper Iblīs used now. At that moment, Talha understood that nothing was accidental. For the best or worst, he was destined to meet Slater.

The sickening smell of blood and death washed over him as the reaper took another step. His body tensed, his self-protection instincts screamed for him to run, but he forced himself to stay. Staring into the transparent eyes, he waited for the younger man to decide, as the realization that he might die right now tightened his stomach.

“I’ve heard about you,” Slater said. “People like you. People respect you. They say you are a fair and honest master. They say you are scared of no one. Is that true?” Talha said nothing. Slater continued, “You look young. Getting out of one death trap and you want to enter another. You aren’t smart, are you? Have you nothing to lose?”

Iblīs leaned forward, sucking air in through his nose the same way wild animals do, and the smile touched his eyes. “No, that’s not the case. You are thirsty. Power-thirsty... My favorite type. Aren’t you afraid?”

Talha didn’t reply, worried that his nervousness might find its way into his voice, so he squared his jaw, hoping his body language could speak better than words.

“Interesting... I’ve never had such a young and handsome master. That makes me curious; will you be able to handle me?” The liquid voice, rasping with suspicion, made Talha clench his fists.

Forcing his vocal cords into submission, he said, “Try me.”

“Hmm...”

“What do you want? Money? Power? Luxuries?”

Slater giggled. “No... Slater doesn’t need money. Slater can’t be bought, but Slater can be owned.”

“What do you want then?”

“Everything: your soul, body, life, and devotion. Betray me, and I’ll kill you. Disgrace yourself, and I’ll kill you. Fear anything, and I’ll kill you. Get weak, and I’ll kill you. Rules are simple, Talha.” Iblīs’ breath touched his face, as the younger man got to his toes and leveled their eyes. Their faces so close, Talha could feel the warmth of Slater’s skin with his chest. “Are you scared yet?”

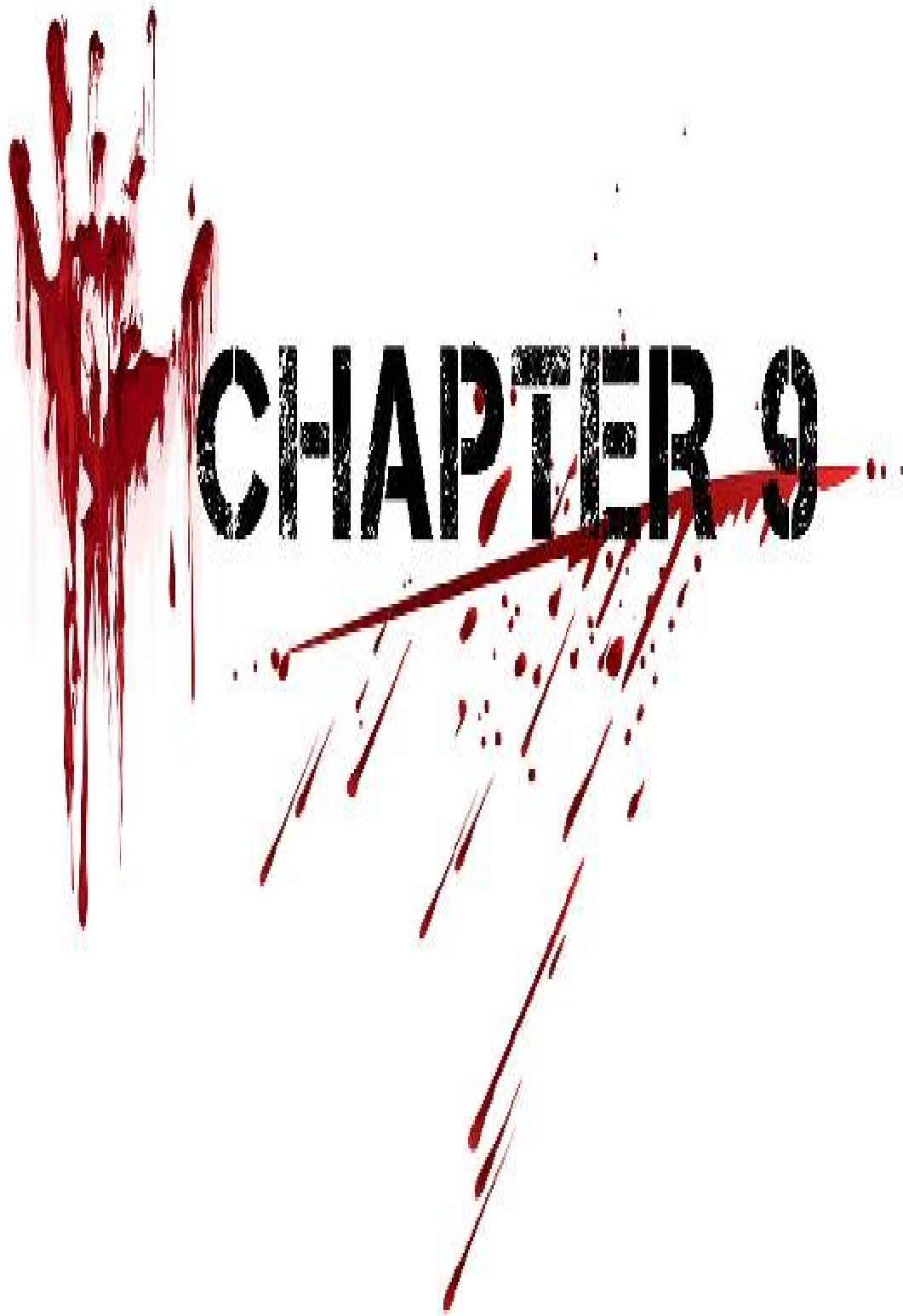
“Why would I be?”

“Huh? You are funny. Fine. I’ll follow you. But there will be no escape from the deal. And the price is steep, Master. I belong to you, but you, Master, belong to me.”

The word ‘deal’ escaped Talha’s lips, and he hoped he wouldn’t live to regret his hasty decision.



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**PRESENT**

**ICE AND FIRE FLOGGING HIS BODY** kicked him out of sleep. Muscles contracting, he gasped for air, but the stripe of duct tape

prevented his mouth from opening. Subduing the first rush of panic, he drew in a long breath. Eyes blinking the water off, he managed to lift his upper body and look around. Water cascades rushed down his sides. Cold pools gathered in the indents of his stomach. Ice cubes littered the floor; some remained on his belly. His gaze stumbled over black pants, traveled up the strong hips and stomach, before reaching the head, tilted to the side.

“Morning shower, Talha.” Slater sniggered. Standing on Talha’s left, he put the tin bucket aside. An acute smile split his face with a white line of his pressed lips. Squatting down, he ran his long fingers over Talha’s belly, flicked several ice cubes off on his wake, then leaned closer and blew at Talha’s skin, chasing the remaining droplets off his navel. “How was your wedding night with Hanım? Did you make her happy?”

Talha growled. All blood vessels in his body shrunk, and the bone-deep chill he had been fighting all night rushed down his spine and reverberated with a splitting headache. Body shaking, he pierced Slater with a murderous stare, but the younger man didn’t seem to notice.

“How did you sleep?” The electric gaze grazed Talha’s skin, as the ripper gave him a once over. Slater’s throat bobbed, and his hot palm landed on Talha’s cold stomach. Talha tensed as all his senses edged under the touch, seeking, absorbing the drops of Slater’s warmth. “Or were you too busy with Hanım to sleep?”

Talha didn’t respond.

“You don’t look very happy. Didn’t you enjoy yourself?” The frown on Slater’s face morphed into understanding. “Oh, right. Stupid me. How could you enjoy yourself if your hands are tied and Hanım doesn’t have them at all?”

Pressing an elbow against his knee, Slater propped his chin upon his palm and chewed on his lip.

“What to do?” he wondered. His beautiful features transformed into a demonic mask. “Let’s make a deal, shall we? Kiss Hanım like a bride, fuck her mouth like you mean it, and I promise I will let you go.”

*Are you insane?* Talha tried to repeat his mental question, but only “Agrh ugh ighsharh?” ripped through his throat.

Slater’s lips twitched in a poorly concealed grin. His fingers sank into the platinum mess of Camilla’s hair as he hoisted her head



and brought it to his face.

“What? She is still pretty, isn’t she? Smells a little bit off, but well, it shouldn’t stop true love.” The back of his index finger brushed against Camilla’s slack face, outlining her cheek and chin. Giving her a weird look, Slater pecked her on the forehead. “So, you have the choice, Talha. Either you make love to your beloved Hanım, or you are going to face a long and agonizing death by my hand.”

Talha faced away.

“What would it be, Talha?” Camilla’s head entered Talha’s field of vision. Dark spots colored the cheek that had pressed to the ground, and an unbearable stench of death crawled up his nose, turning his stomach. Grabbing her chin with his free hand, Slater mimicked her voice and moved her jaw up and down. “Kiss me, Talha, or am I not pretty anymore?”

The spiteful insult whacked Talha’s head back to the glacial eyes. An impetuous blood rush slamming into his head wiped every thought and erased the corners of the room. An animalistic roar broke out of his throat, and he yanked the ropes, again and again, until his wrists burned.

He was mad at Slater for killing Zaal, Camilla, and her people, but it wasn’t the first time Slater had slipped out of his grasp, so Talha counted times like this as his own failures. He wasn’t particularly furious about Slater kidnapping him, and, eventually, he would be able to forgive him the rape. But this was *UNFORGIVABLE*.



**SLATER'S INSIDES BOUNCED.** Shrinking and expanding with building up energy, they pulsed and trembled, forcing his body into a constant movement. It was harder and harder for Slater to stay put by Talha's side.

*Choose this bitch. Come on, choose her!* Pure, agonizing hatred storming in his chest, he shoved the severed head into Talha's face, forcing the choice upon him.

*Talha betrayed Slater. Talha got weak. Talha should die...* But no matter how many times he repeated it in his head; he couldn't bring himself to finish off the man. The air was potent with emotion, but unlike the sour taste of fear, this was spicy, hot, bitter. This wasn't fear but all-consuming rage. Rage that burned out the oxygen from Slater's lungs, making him weak.

*Not good...* He had no problems with killing his previous masters once they brought disgrace upon themselves or showed any weakness, then why couldn't he kill Talha? *Talha is the worst. Talha chose a woman over Slater. Talha submitted to a pussy. Slater should kill him!*

Locking his gaze with Talha's, Slater felt the overpowering effect the amber eyes always had over him. The unbending will the man emitted absorbed into his skin, demanding he submit. Even

now, beaten up, abused, and raped, Talha didn't sink in despair, intensifying the burning ache in Slater's chest. Talha didn't break down, didn't beg, didn't tremble in fear.

*Master should suffer. Master should drown in disgrace, then Slater can kill him.*

“Make your choice, Master, or I will make it for you. What will it be?”

But Talha did nothing to indicate his decision. Swaying right and left, the head stayed by Talha's face for another minute. Slater realized that Master had never spared Camilla even a fraction of attention. Once again, Master looked only at him. With loathing, with hatred, but his focus was on Slater.

*Master isn't fair. Master can't throw Slater away and pick him up whenever Master pleases. There is no way back. Master chose her once, and Master will have to choose her again. Broken or not, Master will.* But he never said it; instead, his lips dropped, “Very well, Talha.”

His spare hand reached behind his back, and the habitual weight of the karambit landed in his palm. The black claw swished in the air and licked Talha's chest, slicing the tender flesh above his heart. The vertical, two inches cut instantly beaded with blood.

“That's one, Master.”

Slater froze, overwhelmed. The smell of blood wafted in, making his head spin. The crimson line on his master's chest was so perfect, so beautiful, that he wondered why he had never marked Master's body before. Red beads of blood swelled and formed a lazy trickle. *So beautiful, so perfect.* He itched to taste it. Submitting to the weird craving, he leaned forward and brushed his tongue against the wound. An electric impulse ran from the tip of his tongue down to the depth of his core, instilling a weird agitation. The dramatic contrast of temperatures between his mouth and Master's body set his soul in turbulence, making him unsure about what to do next. He glanced up.

Emotions flickered on Talha's face as he stared down at his chest, morphing from confusion into astonishment and disbelief, then to something dark and unpleasant. Something that made Slater's chest blaze with pain—disappointment.

Crushing his tangled feelings, Slater said, “You traded me to Hanim, didn't you?” Bringing her head up to his own ear, he

frowned, listening to the silent mouth. His smile returned. “Well, then, it makes her my Mistress. And Hanım just told me—she wants you to suffer.”

Getting up, Slater licked the droplets of Talha’s blood off the blade before sheathing it.

“You refused my deal, so now there is no salvation. I offered you life, now you will only face death. The day will come when you fuck her mouth. I have all the time in the world, but you don’t. Time spares no one, Talha. Day by day, she will rot, so my advice, do it now while she is still pretty, and I will kill you fast and painless because every day you refuse her, you will scream, cry, and suffer. Everyone can be broken, Talha. Give up. There is nothing left for you, only pain.”



**SLATER HAD LEFT LONG AGO**, but his even voice, void of emotions, still rang in Talha’s ears. Psychopathic, short-tempered, unbalanced, Slater had always been hard to deal with, but this sepulchral, lifeless voice stripped of his ever-present, liquid intonation was something new, something Talha wished never to hear again.

Beams of light sneaked through the grate into the small chamber with the warm summer air. Talha embraced the heat with

all his being. But the more day progressed, the more his prison resembled a suffocating 'brazen bull'. Overheated, packed with dust and the sickening stench of death, it made him gag and wish he could breathe through his mouth.

His bladder ached, and at some point, he had to let himself go. He found little consolation in the thought that he didn't need to take a shit yet. His feverish mind threw him from deep remorse that he hadn't listened to Ejder and hadn't chipped Slater, to the realization that even if he managed to survive, the road to England would be closed for him forever.

*'You reek of a bitch, Master.'* Slater's voice rang in his mind, and he closed his eyes, seeking escape from the torturing realization. *I should have known. I should have seen it coming. He was obviously bothered by Camilla, but I ignored him, hoping the sex and beating would do the trick. I should have talked to him. I should have made him understand. Now it's too late...*

He shuddered, remembering the demonic feast Slater arranged and couldn't help but wonder who'd been the "lucky" one to make the discovery.

*Was it Ejder? The police? Someone else? Is anyone looking for Slater now? Is anyone looking for me? What will happen if they find Slater?*

There was no way in the world that Slater would give anyone his location, and at that moment, Talha hoped that no one would find Slater.

The pain in his ass had dulled and didn't reappear again, suggesting that Slater took his time preparing him. The vivid memory of abuse seared his cheeks and made his blood boil; it also plunged him into a thoughtful mood.

Talha had never bottomed before. Slater had never shown any kind of interest in topping him, so Talha had never raised this question, satisfied with how things had been. Talha had never touched another man in his life, making Slater the only exception... *If he wanted to kill me, torture me, punish me, why did he bother with stretching me? This doesn't make any sense...*

The vivid image of Slater's red, flustered face surfaced in his memory. Covered with sweat and trembling with primitive need, Slater had always been different from any man. The only one Talha could ever imagine in his bed.

The image blurred, then sharpened, plunging him into a mist of memories.



## **5 YEARS AGO**

**“MAKE A LIST OF THINGS YOU NEED,** and Zeynep will take care of it. Do you have anything you want to pick up? Documents? Weapon? Money?”

“No, I have everything I need, Master.”

Talha frowned, listening to the rather unpleasant, oscillating voice of his new assassin. The curious gaze Slater gave him flickered with sparks of hidden laughter as if Slater doubted that someone like Talha was worth his loyalty. This thought pissed Talha off.

“Your room,” Talha said, controlling his temper. Pushing the door open, he invited Slater in with a careless hand gesture. Heavy with gold and blue, the spare bedroom was a little ostentatious for his liking, but he hoped Slater wouldn’t mind. “Zeynep will help you with everything else.”

Sparing the room no glance and ignoring the maid, Slater peered into Talha’s face.

“Slater stays here alone?” The constant jumping from the first person to third, confused the hell out of Talha, but he noticed that more often than not, Slater jumped to the third person when his voice trembled with emotion.

“Do you want a woman?”

“A woman?” A creepy smile stretched Slater’s lips as his head tilted to the side. His eyes lost all curiosity and now glared at Talha with an open challenge.

Touched by the same irritation that seized Slater’s shoulders, Talha uttered, “Whatever it is you want, tell Zeynep. She will arrange everything. And, I don’t know what rules you had to follow in Behçet’s house. You lived with him, right?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Here ...” With the lift of his chin, Talha gestured to the small middle-aged woman, dressed in a black abaya<sup>[17]</sup>. A black hijab<sup>[18]</sup> covered her hair; she kept her eyes downcast. “... the staff is off-limits. Understand?”

“Where does Master sleep?” Slater’s foot tapped the floor.

“Second floor. Down the corridor. Why?”

“Slater should learn the rooms so Slater can protect.”

“Do as you please.” Brushing his new assassin off, Talha hurried upstairs. His hands still shook with adrenaline; gunfire echoed in his ears, and his head was splitting apart. The fresh stitches on his head, where the bullet caught him, ached, annoying him further. He needed to sleep before he could think of what to do next.



**THE OMINOUS PRESENCE PUNCHED** Talha out of his sleep, tightening every nerve in his body. He wasn't sure what woke him up, but the haunting feeling of someone looking at him sent a chilly rush down his body. Reaching the nightstand, Talha switched the lamp on. Golden light illuminated the room.

Blood rushed to his head, his heart stuttering.

“What the fuck?” he growled, watching Slater’s full lips stretch into an innocent smile. Wearing only sweatpants, Slater sat cross-legged on the edge of his bed, snuggling with a huge bowl. His spare hand tirelessly sent one popcorn ball after another into his mouth. The sweet smell of butter and caramel suffused the air, joining the low crunchy sound. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Learning the rooms, Master.”

“Why the fuck are you doing it at night? Get the fuck out!”

Slater’s cheek twitched as he stretched out his words. “No. You sleep. I’ll watch. Unless you are scared of me, Master.”

*What the hell?* Confused, lost, alert, Talha stared into the handsome features of the younger man, unable to understand what the hell he wanted. Not sure what to do, he kicked the blanket off, got up, strolled up to a tall mashrabiya<sup>[19]</sup> window, and pried the



wooden shutter open. The night wind, breaking in, caressed his face, calming his nerves.

“Let’s make something clear, Slater.” He wasn’t sure where the calm voice came from, because his soul boiled with anger, but when he turned around, the younger man listened with attention. “You aren’t allowed in my room unless I order you to come.”

Slater’s smile fell, but he didn’t stop eating. “Why?”

“Why?” Talha repeated, dumbfounded. “Because it’s my room.”

“So?”

“So you aren’t allowed in here. Leave or I’ll throw you out of the window.”

Slater’s jaw stopped working. He got up from the bed, shuffled to the window, and shoved the popcorn bowl into Talha’s chest. His naked torso moved with a slow, imposing grace, but his eyes lost their spark.

“It’s better for everyone if Master gets used to Slater sooner, rather than later. Slater will leave today, but Slater will sleep here tomorrow. If you want to have Iblīs, you have to forget about your privacy. Get used to me, or our deal will come to a rather sudden end, Master.”

Talha didn’t know what to say, except, “Why do you want to sleep here? Don’t you like your room? We can redecorate it...”

“Huh? Master is funny,” Slater said without a shadow of a smile before strolling out of the room.

*What the hell...*



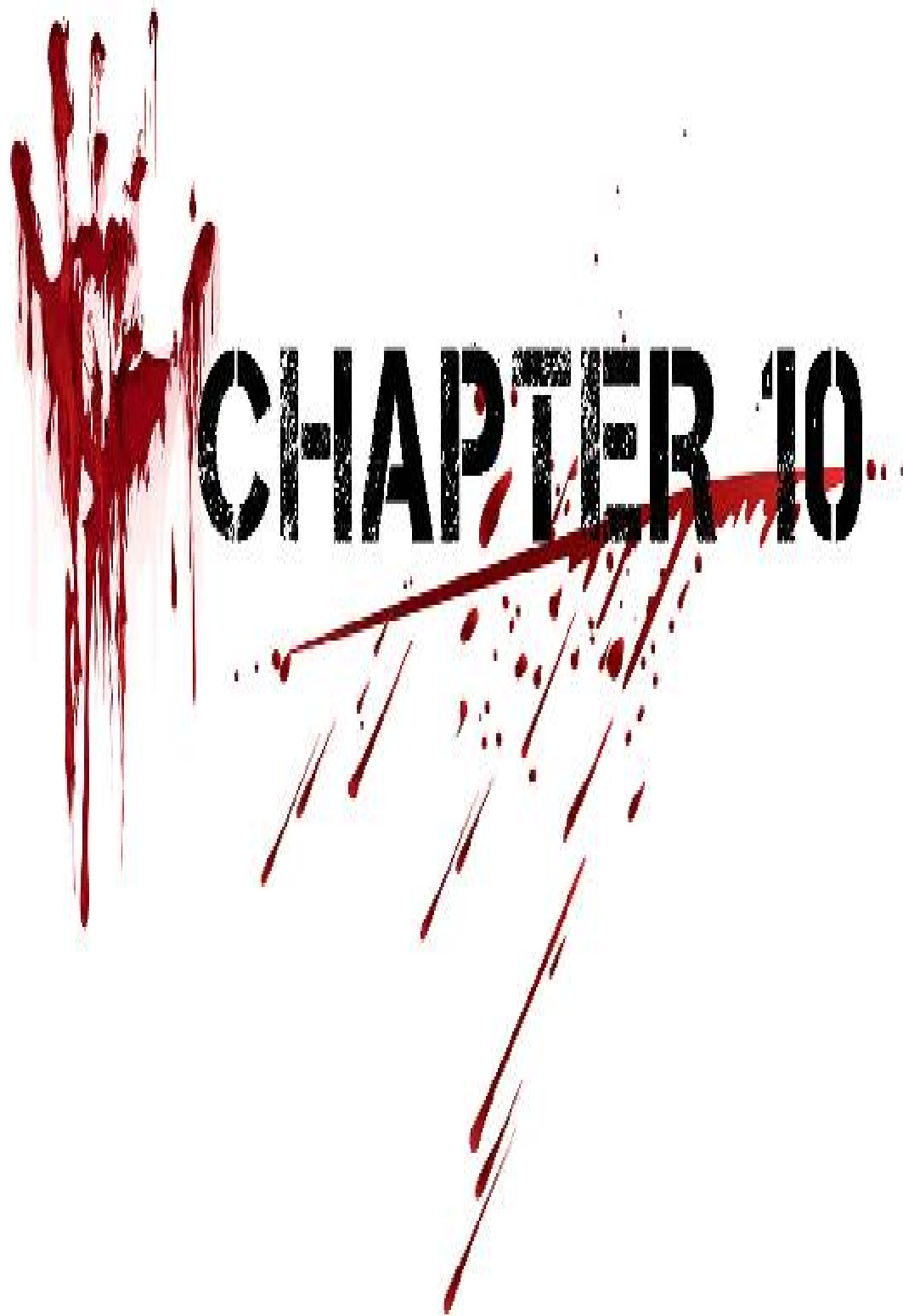
**TOSSING IN HIS BED**, Talha tried to understand what had happened and what Slater expected from him, but the answers eluded him. Adrenaline wiped the sleep from his head, leaving only small, neurotic tremors in his fingertips. When the first red beams of the awakening sun sneaked into his bedroom weariness took him, plunging him into a heavy, thick sleep.

He dreamed about the old mosque, gunfire, and the bloody map decorated with organs. The fireplace crackled, chewing on wood with toothy flames. But instead of Behçet, he was the one lying on the floor with his arms spread to the sides. Throwing knives, stabbing through his palms, secured his hands to the ground as Slater took one of his organs after another, and pinned them to the map. When his split open stomach emptied, Slater slumped down onto his chest. The piercing ice of his cold gaze searched Talha's face and fingers reached out to his eye.

"No, no, no, no..." Talha tossed his head from one side to another, trying to escape, but the scorching clamps of Slater's fingers seized Talha's jaw. Digging into his eye, the fingers seized his eyeball, squeezed it. A keen pain jolted through Talha's head, stripping his scream of sound.



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**PRESENT**

**A MERCILESS KICK TO HIS RIBS** kicked Talha out of the nightmare into the cold, painful reality. Lungs screaming for air, he

wanted to fold over, but the evil restrictions, biting into his wrists, kept him sprawled. The air he drew through his nose wasn't enough to fill his lungs, and black flies congested his sight. Through his marred vision, he registered Slater's tall frame towering over him. A massive leather boot neared his face and nudged his left cheek.

Talha's head swirled, his swollen tongue refused to move in his dried-up mouth, and not a single drop of saliva moistened his throat. He blinked. His eyelids scratched against his eyeballs as if invisible sand filled his eyes.

He didn't remember blacking out, but now, looking at Slater's military boot, he wasn't sure what he preferred more, the painful reality or the nightmare from his past.

The first gray morning light snaked into the chamber through the air grille. The sound of dripping water, resounding in his consciousness, intensified his thirst. He tried to move, but his immobile limbs felt alien to his body and barely responded with a weak twitch.

He groaned his desperation, concentrating on Slater. Dressed in a tight-fitting white shirt and blue jeans, Slater looked refreshed, well-rested. His slim fingers dipped into a brown paper bag, fished out a piece of baklava, dripping in syrup, and tossed it into his mouth. His lashes trembled closed as he moaned.

*You, son of a bitch!* Rage rippled through Talha's core, painting the world in red. Roaring, he threw his body forward, testing the limits of the ropes, then again and again, until his wrists ached. White nothingness replaced his thoughts, and if not for the restraints, he would have probably killed Slater on the spot. No one had ever disrespected him like this. People died from his hand for a lesser insult.

Blue eyes flew open, and Slater glanced down.

"What is it, Master?" he asked innocently, tossing another pastry into his mouth. "You want some too?"

His fingers disappeared into the paper bag and reappeared carrying a dripping piece of pistachio baklava. He squatted down by Talha's side and smeared the syrup all over the duct tape. Leaning in, he licked Talha's glued lips.

Talha lurched forward, trying to grant Slater with another headbutt, but the assassin recoiled, then chuckled. "So energetic. I assume your night with Hanım went well?"

Without waiting for the reply, Slater got to his feet and strolled toward the door, where a black backpack stood propped against the wall.

“Thirsty?” His unstable voice echoed in the room. Bending forward, he fished a plastic water bottle out of the backpack. Giving Talha a wide, toothy smile, Slater wandered back, swaying the bottle in the air. Talha’s gaze glued to the clear liquid; the hypnotic movements consumed his attention. “So?”

Unsure how to respond, Talha granted him with a long stare, trying to figure out what game Slater played. Overstepping Talha’s sprawled leg, Slater came to his face.

“Rub your face against my boot. Beg me to spare you.” His hard, cold voice rung in the silence, multiplied by the dull echo. “Do that, and I will let you drink.”

*Son of a bitch!* Talha’s jaw clenched, hands formed fists, and he heard his teeth screech. The mental slap Slater’s words provided evaporated the numbness out of his consciousness.

The corner of Slater’s mouth curled up as he unscrewed the lid and made a few deep swallows. His Adam’s apple jumped the last time, before Slater filled his mouth with water, gargled, then spat it on the ground.

A molten ball of fire shot through Talha’s core up to his throat. His nails bit into his palms.

“No? You aren’t thirsty...” Squatting down by Talha’s face, Slater flipped the bottle bottom up, pouring the remains of water on the ground. “Too bad...”

*Fucker!*

“Anyway, I have a surprise for you!” Eagerly nodding, Slater threw the empty bottle away. “But... Let me show!”

Movements jumpy, he sprinted to his backpack. Hand diving in, he extracted a long, bluish arm.

*What the fuck?* Talha’s throat closed, as Slater waved the severed limb in the air.

“Nice?” He smiled, his words dripping with hatred as they left his twisted mouth. “Now, you can truly enjoy your time with Hanım. See how kind I am?”

Fingers wrapping around Camilla’s elbow, Slater lay her delicate palm on his other hand, then brought it to his face, and

placed a kiss on each of her fingernails.

*No. Stop...* He tried to speak, the words bubbling in his throat died out, choked by the duct tape.

“Everything you wish for comes true, Talha. You wanted Hanım? You can enjoy her all you want. You wanted Iblīs? Here I am, ready to fulfill your every dark desire.” Face unreadable, Slater moved toward Talha. His military boots stopped between his prisoner’s spread legs; he fell to his knees. “Slater will do everything for Master like Slater has always done. Even now, I’ll help you enjoy your time with Hanım.”

The ice of the dead fingers landed on Talha’s stomach, making him shudder and writhe. Slowly crawling up his torso, they stumbled over the hollows of his rigid muscles, scraping him with long nails. Clenching his teeth, Talha jerked, as the helplessness gutted him, and poisoned every cell with cold, sticky desperation.

“What is it, Master?” Slater’s voice was dark and trembling, as he glued fake concern to his face. “Aren’t you happy? Or doesn’t Hanım touch you in the right places?”

Palm pressed against the ground, Slater leaned his weight on his left arm and slanted forward. The rough fabric of his black pants rubbed against Talha’s thighs while he guided Camilla’s hand up Talha’s neck, then over his face.

An animalistic roar crashed against Talha’s glued lips, scratching the back of his throat. Avoiding the icy touch that reeked of death, he whipped his head to the right, and his eyes met Camilla’s deadly glare.

“Yes, Master. Here it is. Look at her. Look at your bride.” The notes in Slater’s voice grew darker, but spikes of high-pitched vowels screamed of his mental frenzy. Camilla’s hand disappeared from Talha’s face, and landed over his stomach, as Slater sat back on his heels. “Look only at her. Don’t you think she deserves it? After all, she died for you.”

Talha jolted, as Camilla’s frigid fingers slunk down his lower belly, outlined the triangle of his pubic hair, and landed over his cock. Swamped by fury, Talha thrashed against the ground. His eyes burned, blood vessels in his head strained with pressure, ready to burst any moment.

Under his glare, the ripper’s features wrenched with a painful mix of anguish and contempt.

“No!” he hissed, swaying the dead arm in the air, and the icy hand flogged Talha across his cheek, smacking his head back to Camilla’s dead face. “Don’t look at me. Look at her while she’s pleasing you.”

Talha clenched his teeth, glaring at the ripper. Slater’s face was red, lips parted, and his chest rose and fell in a rugged, heavy rhythm.

“I said, look at her!” Slumping forward, he rested his belly on top of Talha’s.

An evil palm smacked his ear. Forcing Talha’s face to the side, it imprinted his right cheek into the grainy floor. The heel of Slater’s palm, pressed on the tender spot of Talha’s jaw hinge, intensified the soul-shredding feeling of powerlessness. “You did it to her.”

*Why is he doing this? He’s never tortured anyone for days before. If he is this pissed, why am I still alive. What’s holding him back?*

Peering into the dead eyes, Talha wondered why Slater had snapped to begin with?

*If I didn’t know Slater, I’d think he was jealous, but that’s not possible. He is a pureblooded psychopath. He isn’t capable of any complex emotions. And all of his ex-masters had lovers or wives. He never killed any of them. Why did my relationship with her bug him this much if it wasn’t jealousy? What did Camilla do to provoke such strong hatred? Unless she said that he belonged to her.*

Talha squeezed his eyes, resting them for a minute.

*This must be why he snapped. This is why he said I submitted to a pussy. He thinks I gave him to her so he is pissed.*

Talha had made Slater angry so many times. He’d teased him to the breaking point but never before had he pushed Slater too far. Always knowing that he shared his bed with a cold-hearted murderer, he still failed to see who Slater truly was. Annoying, exhausting, bratty, spoiled, perverted, rude, troublesome, needy, yet cute, funny, entertaining, different, selfish—Slater was many things, but only now Talha realized, that he had long forgotten what it was like to fear Slater. Despite Slater slaughtering his bodyguard and the woman he’d intended to marry; despite the kidnapping and rape, something in Talha’s mind refused to believe that Slater could truly harm him. Until now.



Staring into Camilla's dead eyes, Talha stopped fighting.



**“YES, LIKE THIS...”** Slater clenched his teeth and guided Camilla's hand down Talha's crotch. Her icy fingers touched his soft cock, making him shudder in revulsion, but Talha never attempted to avert his face from hers again. A red bruise, marring his cheek puffed, and for some reason, Slater hated that it wasn't his hand that had tainted Master's face, but hers.

A pang of jealousy shot through Slater's chest, and he forced the dead hand between Talha's legs, rubbing the bluish, icy digits against his balls and cock.

“How does it feel, Master?” His voice trembled, as the mental turmoil grew stronger. “Nice?”

Rougher, faster, he worked the dead hand up and down Talha's groin, but the act only tightened his chest with anger. Talha's muscles and veins strained under his skin. Slater darted a worried glance down, fearing to see if Master got hard, yet wanting it. Left by Camilla's long nails, reddening scratches hatched Talha's soft skin.

*This woman...* Even after death, even without her body, she still managed to irritate Slater. She still managed to stay special to Master. Hatred clenched his heart, as Slater couldn't tear his focus

away from yet another mark that this woman left on Master's body. Unable to contain his mixed feelings, he howled, drew back, and tossed the dead arm away. He never looked back, but heard a dull sound and then one more, as the limb hit the wall, before falling onto the floor.

*No one can touch Master. The hand doesn't belong. Master belongs to Slater. Master should learn it.*

With a cruel hand, he undid his belt, snapped the button on his pants open, then pulled out his cock. Giving it a few strokes, he felt a familiar blood rush, streaming to his groin along with searing heat.

*Only Slater can have Master. Master can never escape.*

Spitting on his palm, he smeared the saliva all over his length, shoved one fist under the small of Talha's back to lift his hips, then forced his way into Talha's body.

**BLOOD BOILED AND ROARED IN SLATER'S EARS,** flooding everything with the loud drumming of his heart, except the fast, slapping sounds of flesh hitting wet flesh. Streams of sweat rushed down his cheeks. Gathering at the edges of his face, the cooling drops dripped down and crashed against Talha's red, pained face.

Watching the tossing head and the agony clouding Talha's dilated pupils, Slater hung torn between contradictory desires: to hurt Talha more, so the man would never be able to forget him, or untie him and lick the blood off his wrists and ankles.

The acrid mix of his saliva and sweat proved a poor substitute for a lube. Talha's body resisted the intrusion, but eventually loosened up, engulfing him in blissful heat.

The more Slater stared at Talha, the more he understood: there was no road back. *If Slater doesn't kill Master, Master will kill Slater.* The thought shifted something in his core. With every second, the suction in the depth of his stomach became stronger, as if all of his organs, one by one, had been swallowed by a small black hole, leaving only the itching vacuum behind.

Slater slowed down, then stopped. Bringing his chin to his left shoulder, he listened to the spreading pain in his chest. Acrid, burning, yet dull and throbbing, this was the pain of sickness, not pleasure. Seeking for answers, he peered up.

The tossing of Talha's head stopped. His right cheek pressed to the ground, eyes immobile, as he stared into Camilla's bluish face, like Slater had wanted. Like Slater hated.

*No...* Watching a weird, somberness wandering up Talha's face, Slater bit his lip. The pain on the man's face gave way to a thoughtful, yet tender expression. He searched her face with the same look of concern he had always searched Slater's. "Don't look at her like this..."

Master ignored.

Slater's toes curled, muscles jumped under his skin as arctic frost seized his stomach.

"I said, don't look at her!" He pulled back, then lurched forward, crushing his fists against the floor at either side of Talha's face. The impact reverberated up his elbows and unsettled every one of his nerves. An unfamiliar bitter need wrenched his heart out of his chest, immersing him into agonizing emotional anguish. He didn't know what he wanted to achieve here, except for Master to look at him again.

His eyes burned; he grabbed Camilla's hair and, pouring all his hatred into the gesture, he hurled her head away.

Talha's pupils zoomed out. Slowly, as if fighting an invisible force, Talha rolled his head toward him. A look of disbelief crossed his face. No matter what Slater had done before, Talha had never looked at him like this, as if he didn't recognize the person in front of him.

The air hitched in Slater's throat. Something bubbled in his chest. Clenching his teeth, trying to control his twitching lips, he demanded, "Look only at Slater..."

Unblinking, the man scanned his face with some kind of awe, and Slater remembered the gentle caresses of his mouth and the sweetness of his tongue. Slater hated kissing. Kisses were for the weak. Kisses were for women. He wasn't a woman; he wasn't weak. He didn't need kisses. Kisses were for lovers. Slater never needed a lover. Love was a weakness. Love was a curse; he knew it for sure. Kisses and tenderness made him feel weak, weird, vulnerable, yet greedy and possessive. They sucked his soul out and feasted on it, leaving him messy, needy, empty. No, Slater needed no lover, yet now he couldn't help remembering how Talha's lips tasted.

His tongue burned with a need to feel the sweetness and warmth he'd felt that night. He longed to catch the attentive gaze of amber eyes that observed his every move, to hear the soft chuckle when Master teased him, pleased him. Slater had never felt safe and confident with any of his former masters. Yet, year by year, Talha instilled in his heart the absolute faith that no matter what Slater did, Talha would always forgive him, accept him, and clean his mess. And Slater did his best to test Talha's limits and try to break this faith, but never before had he succeeded, until now.

His mind roiling with confusion, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to the black duct tape, covering Talha's mouth. He closed his eyes, trying to subdue the jerk of his shoulders and control his heavy, rapid panting. The familiar scent of his master's skin invaded his being.

He wasn't sure how long he stayed like this, absorbing his master's warmth with every cell of his body, but when he drew back; his eyes were heavy, hot, and swollen.

Propping himself on one hand, he wiped his face with the back of his hand and cleared his throat.

"Are you ready to fuck her mouth?" No reply. Slater moved his hand behind his back, squeezed the grip of the karambit. Bringing the black blade to Talha's chest, he sliced another line down, close to the first one, watching the man's expression darken with deep, complex emotion. "That's two, Master."



**TALHA LAY ON HIS BACK**, blinking into the darkness. Every muscle, every bone, every cell in his body throbbed. His insides swelled, his ass hurt, and merely thinking about the rape clenched his fists in an uncontrollable rage. However, every time his memory pictured Slater's desperate, painful grimace and the watery eyes that searched his soul for answers, Talha's chest tightened.

*Since when did he start having feelings? He even kissed me...* Talha remembered the awkward lips that pressed against the duct tape, the chaotic drumming of Slater's heart coming through his shirt, and then something acrid and hot tickling his skin where Slater rested his face in the crook of his neck. *Did he cry, or was it sweat?*

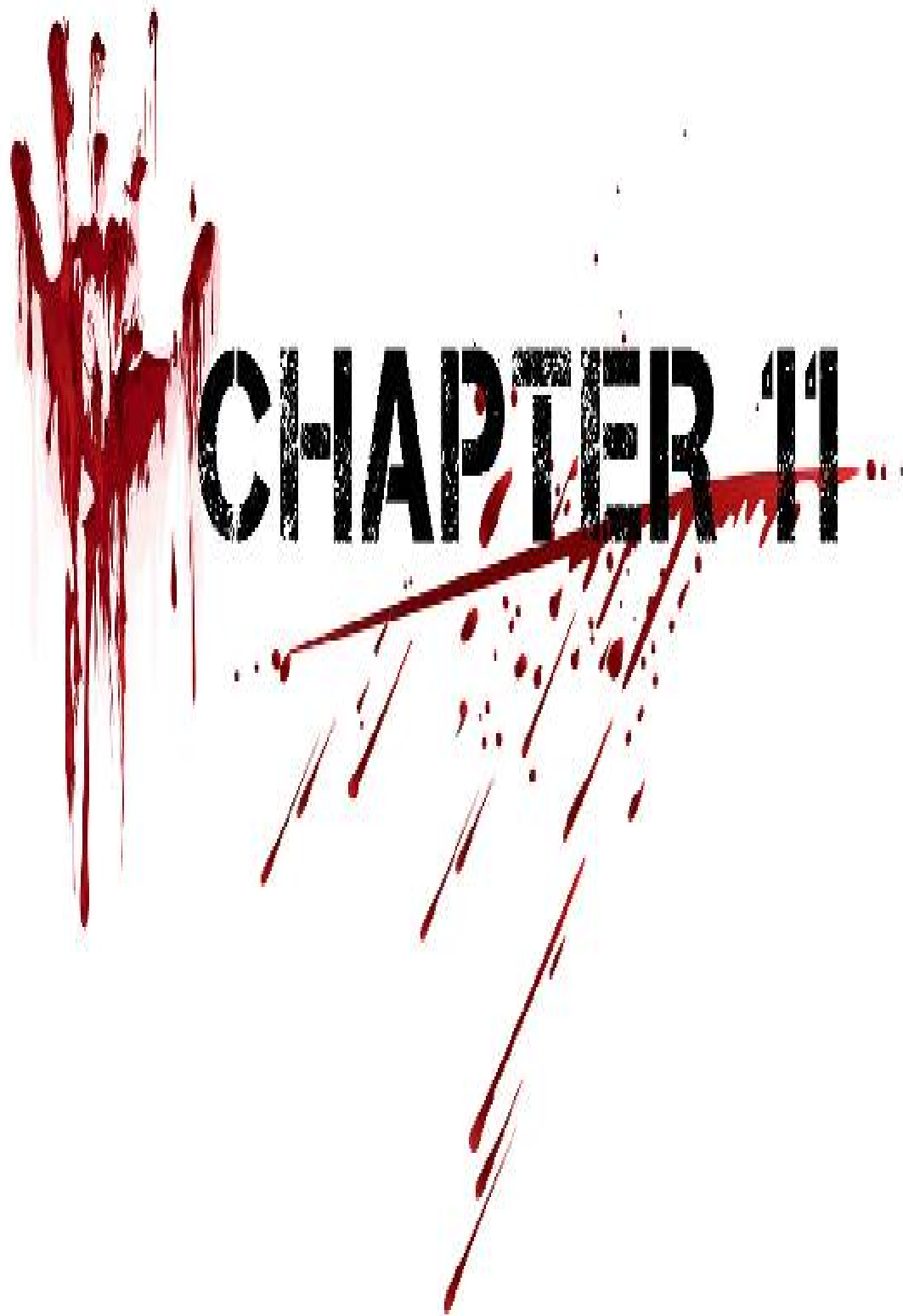
His gaze traveled toward the opposite wall, where Camilla's head lay in the dust.

*Did he do this all because he was jealous? But Slater had never wanted anything but sex and pain. When the fuck did this change? Why didn't he say anything? Fuck, Slater, you are so stupid...*

Talha growled, lifted his head, and bumped it against the ground. His mind slowly trailed back in time to the night when Slater had killed for him for the first time.



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**5 YEARS AGO**

**SEARING PAIN SHOT THROUGH** his head. Emitting from his right temple, then rushed down his stiff neck and settled somewhere

between his shoulder blades. Uncomfortable stillness seized his body. He tried to gasp, but something heavy and hot weighed on his stomach, hampering his breathing and extracted a groan from his throat. Rubbing his cheek with the heel of his palm, he pried his eyes open.

An electric gaze of transparent blue stabbed him from above, as Slater's scorching fingers slithered over his chest. Every caress resounded throughout his body with a pulse of pain.

Blood pressure spiked, sending a wave of heat up his throat as the image from the nightmare flared in his consciousness. Just like now, in his dream Slater towered over him; his long fingers extract one organ after another from his gaping stomach, before pinning them to the bloody wall map with throwing knives.

Adrenaline kicked in, activating his self-preservation instincts. Before he understood what was going on, his fist collided with Slater's face and tossed him aside. With a cat-like grace, as if the punch provided no impact or pain, Slater landed on all fours. Head snapping to the side, he grinned, fisted the crumpled bedsheet with one hand, rubbed his cheek with another. "Master is feisty today..."

He didn't look hurt or insulted. Observing Talha with a mix of curiosity and attention, he sat back on his heels with his palms resting on the top of his thighs. Like yesterday, he wore only sweatpants, which left the tanned skin of his upper body exposed. Scrutinizing his visitor, Talha noticed that Slater's skin wasn't all that perfect. He ignored the distinctive round scars left by bullets that decorated Slater's shoulders and dotted the left side of his torso. He also discounted the thin knife lines on the outer side of his left forearm, and his right upper belly, as those screamed of battle wounds. His whole attention concentrated on the light, barely visible round scars that specked Slater's chest right below his protruding collarbones. The same scars dotted his lower belly, disappearing in the depth of his pants. Those weren't scars earned in fights. Those were cigarette burns, left by torture.

Shaking his head, Talha scowled. His focus slid from the ripper to his own torso. A huge purple hematoma, left by the rain of bullets, spread over his chest and glistened with something transparent and sticky. Pressing his fingers to his skin, he smeared the greasy substance, then brought his fingers to his face. A heady, herbal scent crawled up his nose, making him flinch back.

"What d-de fuck is this?" Talha asked, stuttering.



“Ointment, Master.” Picking up a small white plastic jar that lay on the linens, Slater screwed the lid back on. “Master is careless. Master needs protection. Slater will protect...”

Perplexed, Talha lost track of his thoughts, burning with a desire to smash Slater’s face against the floor, so the reaper would forever forget the way to his bedroom, but a tiny doubt, fizzing at the back of his consciousness, stopped him. *He treated my bruises... Why?*

*‘Master needs protection.’* he replayed Slater’s words in his mind, and wondered if this was how Slater had been with all his masters?

*Is he just an assassin, or does having Iblīs mean no privacy and a constant annoying shadow? Is Slater the reason Behçet survived all this time? Because Slater protected him? With those questions, another one surfaced in his mind. Did Slater come to Behçet’s bed at night, like this?*

He cringed, shook his head, and kicked the blanket off.

“Why do I even think about it?” Talha muttered under his breath, then slapped barefoot toward the bathroom, needing a cold shower to clear his head. Glancing over his shoulder, he added, “You’d better be gone before I’m out of the shower. And never enter my room again, or we will have problems. Is that clear?”

Slater didn’t reply, but his smile grew wider.



**TALHA'S HEAD HURT.** Forgetting about his stitches, he stepped into the shower cubicle, and the first threads of cold water hit the top of his head. The myriads small needles, piercing his mind, sedated his confused thoughts.

*What a mess...* he thought, remembering the shoot-out in the mosque, then Slater's weird behavior and creepy demand to stay in his room. *What did I get myself into?*

He would have regretted making that deal, but Talha had many enemies. After seeing what Slater had done to his former master, he hoped that no one else would ever have Slater, as he had no desire to share Behçet's fate. *I have to learn how to deal with him or put him down.*

Shaking his head, he cast thoughts about Slater out of his mind, and steered them to his business affairs. He made a mental note to visit Ejder in the hospital, before seeing his police informant to ensure he got rid of all the evidence left after the shootout.

His fingertips creased. Turning the water off, he snatched a towel, wrapped it around his hips, and wandered back to the bedroom.

His calm evaporated as soon as his gaze landed on Slater who sat on his bed in the exact position as the evening before. With

a black throwing knife, he was slicing an apple, sending piece after piece into his mouth.

“Breakfast, Master?” The innocent look on his face made Talha’s teeth grind. Cutting another piece off the apple, Slater stretched out his hand and offered it to Talha.

“What do you think you are doing?” Talha felt like an idiot. The mental turmoil settled in his chest as Slater peered back at him. He could kick Slater out or beat him bloody, but he had a haunting feeling that Slater had a hidden agenda. More than that, Talha wasn’t sure he would win a physical confrontation. Behçet had been a strong man, a good fighter, yet Slater didn’t have a single bruise on his body. Using a weapon to threaten him sounded like a horrible idea. Raised in Mardin, Talha learned that a weapon should only be drawn if you intended to use it. Talha followed that rule, not wanting the reputation of a barking dog that never bites. If Slater didn’t respect his words, why should he respect his actions? What good would empty threats be if he needed Slater to work for him? Instead of hitting the man or threatening him, he said, “If you are trying to piss me off, you are doing very well.”

“Hmm...” Slater’s face stretched in a toothy smile. He opened his mouth and put in the piece of apple that Talha hadn’t taken.

*Is it a sick game? Is he testing me?*

“Didn’t we talk about it yesterday?”

“We did. Master must have forgotten. Slater stays here from today.”

Talha grimaced. Suppressing a groan, he scratched his cheek. *If Slater stays in my house we will end up killing each other. If I wake up tomorrow and he is in my room, I will fucking put him down...* In and out, counting till fifteen on every inhale, he took a few deep breaths, willing himself to calm down.

A vice of tension releasing his throat, he drifted to the closet and fished out some underwear.

“No, Slater doesn’t.” He rolled his eyes, realizing that he was starting to talk about Slater in the third person. *I barely know him, yet he’s already fucking with my mind.* Dropping the towel to the floor, he put the black cotton trunks on, then added, “I have no time for this sick game of yours. Gather your things, you are moving out.”

Disregarding the ripper's presence, he grabbed the black pants.

A chilling low voice reached his ears from behind. "No. Slater stays here."

"Listen..." Pushing a calming breath out, Talha stuffed the pants back into the closet, faced the younger man, then said as clear as he could, "I don't know what duties you carried out before, but with me, it will be simple. I pay you money—you kill for me. If I need you—I call for you. The rest of the time, you pretend you don't exist. Understand? I don't need you to protect me twenty-four seven. I don't need you in my house and my fucking bedroom."

"Master is joking again, huh?" Slater's voice trembled with something deep and dark. "Master is funny. That wasn't the deal. Slater stays."

Talha shrugged. The more time he spent with Slater, the more he doubted that someone like him could be the bloodiest ripper of Anatolia. "I'm not even sure you are who you say you are. For all I know, you're just a psycho who butchered Behçet. More than that, you haven't proved yourself useful to me, yet you are already this close..." Talha used his index finger and thumb to make his point. "...to exhausting my patience. I have no reason to tolerate this... whatever this is. It's my house, my rules, my fucking bedroom. Yet, you have no respect for any of this."

**SHHHH** came without a warning. The black knife ripped through the air, sinking deep into the carved wood of the closet a mere inch away from Talha's face. Talha's heart dropped as his eyes followed the trajectory of the knife. In disbelief, he gripped the handle, then tugged it out of the wood.

"Never doubt me, Master." An unconcealed warning vibrated in Slater's voice, and Talha faced his ripper.

*That's it...*

"I have lots of patience. I always give people a chance." Talha's jaw hurt with pressure as he pushed the words through gritted teeth. "I can be forgiving; I can be generous. However, I am going to say this once. If you ever do something like that again, make sure you don't miss because there will not be the third time."

"Slater never misses. A fly, Master," Slater hissed.

Slowly, as if in a dream, Talha unglued his gaze from the reaper and dragged it to the knife. A fat, green fly jerked its legs in

the air, stabbed through the guts with a long, thin throwing knife. He faced the door, but Slater had already disappeared.



**THE FOLLOWING DAYS, THE FALLOUT** of the war swept over Talha, distracting him from thinking about Slater. Ejder's shoulder was healing well, but Talha still insisted on him staying in the hospital for at least a week. The ripper seemed to have gotten the message, as he didn't show up again, but the haunting feeling of someone watching his every move never left Talha. It turned the night he invited a woman over into a complete disaster. No matter how many times he searched his room for signs of intrusion, he had never been able to catch Slater, only the faint smell of cloves and wood. But with every passing day, he grew more and more tolerant of the never ending feel of Slater's presence.

The shoot-out in the mosque stirred up Istanbul's criminal world. Left without their leader, the Asani Cartel wallowed in blood as Behçet's young, sadistic brother tried to prove his right to inherit the family domain.

Standing in the middle of the cool, dim hall of his mansion, Talha held a fat paper envelope in his hand.

"Slater?" he called out. The sound of his voice, smacking against the marble walls shattered into a dozen fractions. "I know

you are here.”

Separating from the impenetrable shadow behind the marble sculpture of Venus, Slater took a step forward.

“What is it, Master?” The look he gave Talha brought a frown of concern to his face and raised a question, *Did I insult him?* The reaper was paler than usual; his eyes feverishly glinted with a silent challenge and something else he couldn’t catalogue.

*I must be overthinking it*, Talha thought, watching the white slit of Slater’s lips hone his features. Slater stood still, yet his body moved with every breath as if his whole being wasn’t created from mortal flesh but from wind and fire.

“I have a job for you.”

Slater didn’t reply, but his head tilted to the side, suggesting he waited for an apology or continuation, Talha couldn’t say which. Unsure how to behave, Talha stepped forward. Stretching out his hand, he offered the envelope to Slater. “Prove yourself to me, and then we will talk about what you want.”

Slater’s expression darkened, morphing into an inquisitive glare. Grabbing the envelope, he tore it open.

“What’s this?” His voice caustic, aggressive, his fingers crumpled the paper.

“The dossier and part payment. Once you are done you will receive twice as much.”

Slater’s long fingers pinched the few sheets of the dossier and pulled it out before he flipped the envelope upside down. Green notes swirled in the air and littered the marble floor; the envelope followed. Slater didn’t spare them a glance. His whole attention was on Talha.

“Slater has already said, but Master didn’t listen. Master never does. Slater doesn’t need money.”

Talha scowled. Slater had said it before, but he had indeed shrugged it off. There was no reason for Slater to work for free, and he never said what exactly he wanted. Vague and obscure, Slater’s demands confused Talha.

“What do you want then? You don’t make any sense. My soul, devotion? Don’t tell me you believe you are the Devil? So sorry to break your delusion, but you have too many scars to be Iblīs.”

Short, barking laughter escaped Slater's lips as he observed Talha with shimmering curiosity.

"Master is funny. Master doesn't understand yet, but Master will." His chest brushed against Talha's as he passed by. "Tonight, Slater stays in Master's room. Master has to get used to Slater, even if Master isn't ready."



**THE THICK SMELL OF BLOOD** and sweat hauled Talha out of his sleep. Hot and heavy, the air stood idle in the room. Someone's solid weight, adding to his suffocation, straddled his hips. Awkward, impatient fingers fumbled over his chest. Wet and warm, they snatched the blanket away, then landed on his shoulders, pinning him deeper into the mattress.

His confused, messy after sleeping thoughts scattered about the room, following his jumping gaze, until they settled on the eyes glinting in the dark. Talha's brain didn't come around, but his body worked on instincts. Fist swishing through the air, he imprinted his knuckles in Slater's left cheek.

For someone so deadly and unpredictable, Iblis was surprisingly easy to hit. Pushing the remaining weight off himself, Talha swatted the wall. **CLICK** joined a dull **BUMP** and a bright light, streaming from the ceiling, illuminated the room.

“What the fuck?” Dirty red smudges marred his light gray bed sheets and his naked chest. A coat of blood crisped over Slater’s face, glinting with occasional sparks that suggested that either the blood was still fresh or Slater couldn’t stop sweating. His black combat shirt with raglan-cut sleeves sat unnaturally tight around his chest. Only when Talha squinted did he notice that it was soaking wet. Parts of his hair tangled together and stuck to his scalp in places, making Talha wonder if Slater’s head was wounded or marred with someone else’s blood.

“Time’s up, Master,” Slater growled then lurched at the man again, his knees on either side of Talha’s hips. Chest contracting, lips spat out a labored breath that washed Talha in heavy, humid air. Strong fingers dug deep into Talha’s shoulder as the blood-covered face approached. “You have to learn how to control Slater, even if you aren’t ready. Now, Master, now, or Slater will kill more. Slater is thirsty. Slater wants blood. Help Slater to stop.”

With every sentence the ripper said, Talha’s mood darkened. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Control you? How? Do you have a fucking manual?”

“Master is funny,” Slater said without a shadow of a smile.

Talha lost his composure. Hand slamming against Slater’s solar plexus, he shoved the reaper back. The younger man swayed and slanted right, palms slapping against the mattress. Pushing him away with his foot, Talha looked around, and only then noticed the severed head of Bekir Asani on the top of his nightstand in a pool of blood. His motor functions froze for a split second as his mind tried to process what was happening. Slater sat back on his heels and removed his hands from the linens, staining the sheet with dirty-red palm prints.

Rage, ripping through Talha’s core, painted everything in white.

“You... What the fuck do you think you are doing?” Talha jumped off his bed as adrenaline substituted his blood. “Why the hell did you bring it here?”

Slater didn’t flinch, but his insane gaze, fixing on Talha’s face, broke through his frenzy, stirring his self-preservation instincts.

“Master doubted Slater. Slater brought Master the proof. Your turn. Help Slater.”



“Get this out of my house! NOW!” Talha’s throat burned from the yell as he pointed his finger to the door.

“No, Master.” The jittery, bouncing urge resounded in Slater’s liquid voice, making it sound even more unstable than usual. Slater’s stance changed. His head bent forward, shoulders tensed, bulged, and every muscle in his body strained under his skin. “Master is young. Master isn’t very smart, but Slater has been patient. Slater gave Master time. The trial period is over. Do it now, or Master isn’t good for Slater.”

Talha’s jaw hurt with pressure as, step by step, he circled the bed. Fists clenched, blanching white, he stormed to the ripper. Fingers grabbing Slater’s shoulder, he shoved the man off the bed to the floor and granted him with the first kick to his solar plexus. Slater’s mouth fell open, arms clasped around his middle, but the ripper didn’t fight back.

“You want me to control you? Fine.” Talha barely heard himself through the loud drumming of his maddening heart. “The first rule is: my room is off-limits.”

Consolidating his words, Talha granted Slater with another kick, then one more. With every hit, the top of his foot darkened with fresh blood.

Slater didn’t defend himself. Instead, a sated glint touched his eyes. “Yes, Master.”

“The second rule is: never disrespect me again.” Bending forward, Talha gripped Slater’s hair, making him look up, before backhanding his face. “The third rule is: no blood in my fucking house, you understand?”

Slater trembled. Watching Talha through the crescents of his half-closed eyes, he looked... *Relieved?* The red color flooding his face softened his features as he granted Talha a bloody smile. “Yes, Master.”

Releasing the tangled, wet hair, Talha added, “The fourth rule is: never make a mess in my house.”

He swung his leg, and the top of his right foot collided with Slater’s stomach, knocking him onto his back. Through the thickening haze of the adrenaline rush, Talha stepped forward and granted Slater with a couple more kicks to his ribs, pushing hoarse, fast breaths out of the ripper’s throat.

“Threaten me again, and I will kill you. You understand?”

“Ye-e-e-s-s,” he stretched the word out. As the challenge drained from Slater’s body, he glanced up with satisfaction. “More, Master. Make it hurt.”

*What the fuck?* Talha shrunk back; his focus slipped to his blood-covered foot. Slater’s reaction made him feel disgusted and dirty, but it also drained the fight out of his body, leaving only exhaustion behind. Bending forward, he grasped Slater’s elbow and tugged him up.

“Shower. Now. After you’re done, get rid of the head. When you’re back—we talk. Do what I say or go to hell.”

The younger man cringed then stumbled, almost dropping to the floor. Shaking his head, Talha heaved a sigh, tightened his grip, then dragged Slater toward the bathroom.



**EASTERN ELEMENTS, FRESCOS,** and grotesque niches decorated the teal and golden bathroom. The blue and silver mosaics on the walls interlinked with golden spider marble descending to the obsidian floor.

It took Slater a few moments to get his usual balance back. He didn’t look like he needed Talha’s help anymore, yet he never pulled his arm out of his grasp. Following, he let Talha push him into the shower cubicle.

“Undress.” The itch to wash the blood off himself curled Talha’s toes, but he ignored it, forcing his focus to Slater. “If you have anything in your pockets you want to keep, get it out and put it on the floor.”

Slater fished the karambit from behind his back, and a set of throwing knives from out of his boots. Fingers fumbling over his thighs, he pulled out five throwing needles from each side of his combat pants, then rolled his sleeves up and unfastened wrist-straps sheaths containing more throwing spikes from each arm.

Slater’s belt hit the floor. Talha snatched a plastic garbage bag from under the sink and held it open. “Next time you burn everything you wear, you clean yourself as good as you can before you come home. I’ll arrange a few places around the city where you can do it, but never again come here covered in blood. The staff should never see you like this, is it clear?”

“Master shouldn’t worry. No one saw Slater.” He pushed the pants down, stepped out of them, but wavered.

“What?”

“Tailor-made... Weapon adjusted.”

“Forget about it.”

Reluctantly, Slater dumped the pants in the bag, then peeled off his top, revealing a sinewy torso painted in crimson.

*Fuck, no wonder he didn’t defend himself.* Sour saliva flooded Talha’s mouth as he watched blood oozing out of a bullet wound on the left side of Slater’s lower belly, right above his hip. An inch away from the outer edge of his torso, the wound looked like the bullet passed through the muscle layer without causing any internal damage, yet blood kept streaming down Slater’s side.

Talha cringed as the guilt for hitting Slater and not paying attention to his condition sooner washed over.

“There is a lot of blood. Is it all yours?”

Bending forward, Slater pushed his trunks down, and Talha wondered how he could move with such blood loss. The wound didn’t seem to bother him at all. When the last piece of clothes disappeared into the garbage bag, Slater straightened up, not even a little embarrassed of his nakedness; quite the opposite, he appeared excited, thrilled, expectant. “No...”

Debating for a second if he should waste time cleaning the blood from the ripper, Talha passed Slater a small hand towel. “Apply pressure.”

Dropping a big, bath towel onto the floor, Talha ordered, “Get down,” then pressed the wall above the sink with both hands. The mosaic slab depressed and slid aside, revealing a hidden closet. Fetching the first aid kit, Talha put it on the floor next to Slater and kneeled by his side.

Slipping sterile gloves on, he picked a swab, soaked it in hydrogen peroxide, and cleaned the area around the wound, before pouring the rest of the solution into the wound. Connecting with the blood, the transparent liquid foamed, turning pink. Waiting for a moment, Talha took another bottle and repeated the process. With the bleeding subdued, he wiped the excessive moisture, examining the edges of the wound. Inflammation bloated the pink skin around the bullet hole.

*Fuck...* He unpacked sterile gauze, soaked it in hydrogen peroxide, then wrapped the end around the long tweezers.

“I have nothing to help with pain. Do you want to bite on something?” Hand hovering over the wound, he eyed Slater.

“No, Master. Slater is good.” He looked flustered, eyes glistening; his tongue slipped out and outlined his plump lips, wetting them.

“Suit yourself.” Talha shrugged, bringing his attention to the task. He hadn’t performed tamponade for years; his fingers felt stiff.

Talha guided the tweezers into the wound. Slater tensed and the blood flow increased.

“Try to relax,” Talha ordered, packing the wound with gauze. Once the cavity was tamped and the blood stopped, he put a clean layer of the dressing over the wound and secured it with a square piece of waterproof, transparent film dressing.

“Okay, this should do until the doc arrives.” Pushing out a breath of concentration, he said, “Roll over.”

Slater did. Talha almost dropped a swab he’d picked. Prominent scars crisscrossed his skin descending to white parallel scars on his ass.

“Oh my fucking god...” he said, unable to blink. His hand, moving on its own, pressed to the ugly, rippled surface of the uneven

skin. Thick and bumpy, it burned Talha's fingertips. Slater flinched under his touch, and red spots popped out around his neck and flowed up, flooding his ears with an intense color of what Talha took for shame. "What the hell is this?"

"A whip, Master." Slater's strangled voice came out hoarse and quiet.

*No wonder he is freaking insane if he was treated like this.*

"Who did this?" Talha's fingers traveled lower, examined the small of Slater's back, and the bullet hole entered his field of vision. Wincing, Talha mentally kicked himself for getting distracted from the wound.

"Dead people." Something twisted seeped into Slater's vague reply, and Talha wanted to look him in the face to see if he was smiling.

Grabbing another bottle of hydrogen peroxide, Talha worked on the wound, performing the process of tamponade yet again.

"Why did they torture you?" He kept glancing up to the white welts as his hands did the mechanical job of packing the wound with soaked gauze.

"Tortured? No, Master. Educated." The words worked like a slap, making Talha flinch. Regret, washing over, shuffled his thoughts, but he still asked, "Your former masters?"

"Yes."

"How many were there?"

"Five."

Talha frowned. "Did you kill them all?"

"Yes, Master."

*Fuck me...* Shaking the topic off, Talha got from his knees. "Done. Can you stand up?"

Slater's shoulders shook as he pushed himself off the ground. Unsteady on his feet, he swayed, and Talha wondered if forcing him to shower was a good idea, but the amount of blood on his body would raise too many questions. Slater didn't look like he was about to collapse, so Talha ordered, "Shower. Now."

Obediently, Slater stepped into the cubicle. Grabbing the showerhead, Talha pointed the tepid stream at the blood-covered torso. The shimmering needles hit Slater's skin, absorbed the color,

and cascaded down in crimson rivulets. Snaking down his muscular legs, the water swirled around Slater's feet, before disappearing into the drain.

Watching Slater's hands move up and down his torso, Talha couldn't help examining his build. With a low amount of fat under his skin, Slater's body could be used as an anatomical exhibit for studying the muscular system. Rather slender, he wasn't built like a heavy lifter or a boxer. With his long sinewy limbs, he probably relied on speed and technique in fights, rather than on brute force. His thin waist and wide, muscular shoulders only magnified his resemblance to the antique sculpture of Discobolus, the disc thrower.

A few long minutes passed in silence before the last smudges of blood disappeared from Slater's front.

"Turn around," Talha ordered. Slater's gaze darkened, obscured. His pupils zoomed out, bleeding into the icy rings of his irises. Nervously licking his lips, he swallowed and provided Talha with a view of his back.

Trying to ignore the welts, Talha took a soft sponge and carefully washed the blood off Slater's head, back, and the top of his legs. It felt like the blood would never clear up, so when Slater was finally clean, Talha felt wiped. Cutting the water off, he huffed, "Done."

Slowly, Slater faced him. Red spots speckled the top of his chest, a pink color that Talha took for shame, flushed his face and dropped his eyelids half-closed. Slater's stomach tightened, bringing Talha's attention to his lower part.

"You are hard..." Talha commented, dumbfounded, and Slater granted him with a toothy grin.

"Master looked. Master touched."

"Slater, are you gay?" Talha winced, realizing that he didn't want to know. The information overflowed his mind, making his head spin. Grabbing the towel, he covered the reaper. "It doesn't matter right now. Can you walk?"

"Yes," Slater said, and Talha wondered what question he answered.

On their way to the spare bedroom, Talha couldn't help remembering the ugly scars decorating Slater's skin. *How old was he when someone did this to him? Education, huh? He wanted me to*

*hit him, to make it hurt. Is it the same as the control he asked for? Or did he come to my bed for another reason?*

He wedged the wooden door open, slapped the switch, and warm light illuminated the calm interior of the white and beige bedroom. Approaching the bed, he tossed the cover away and spread a clean towel over the sheets. "Lie down."

Darting a glance at Talha, Slater obeyed.

"Stay here; I'll arrange a transfer for you to a private hospital." He moved to the door, but a strong hand captured his forearm, stopping him.

"No hospitals. No doctors. Slater's fine."

Instinctively Talha dropped his gaze to Slater's arm. Three needle marks dotted the inner side of his elbow. Unsure how to read it, he peered into Slater's pinpoint pupils. *Fuck my life...* Feeling frustration building up in his chest, Talha prompted, "Are you high?"

"A little..." Slater giggled.

"What did you take?"

"Adrenaline, Fentanyl, a hemostatic, and ..." Slater scrunched his face trying to remember what else but failed.

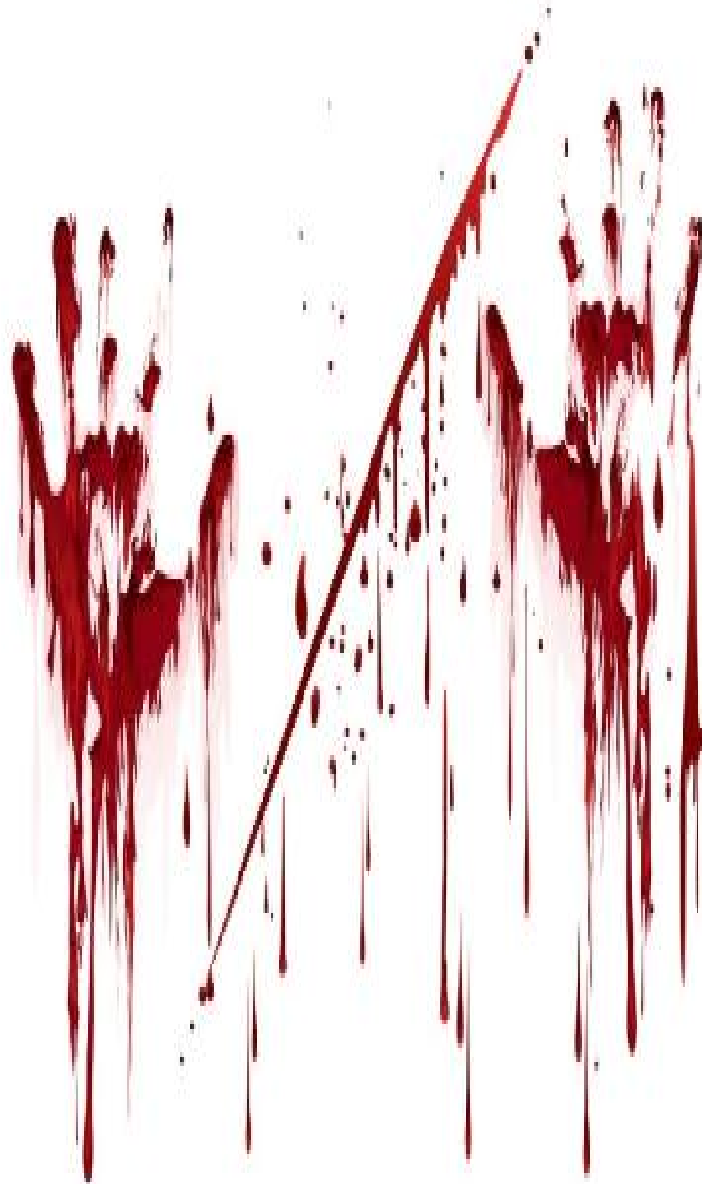
A crushing fist of regret battered Talha's heart. Slater was trouble. Slater was bad news. Slater was everything Talha didn't need, and he couldn't see any way out of the deal, except by killing him. For a second, Talha considered this option, but the white lines of whip marks, so thick it was clear the skin had been broken over and over, surfaced before him. *Has anyone ever treated him like a human being? He's barely older than Ejder, yet he has so many scars... If Behçet hurt him too, no wonder he ended up dead. Why did someone like Slater allow anyone to hurt him?*

So many questions swirled in his head without answers, so many problems to solve. A doctor, a cleaning crew, a fucking severed head in his bedroom, and a high, wounded psycho with a hard-on. Throwing a blanket over Slater's hips, Talha moved for the door. "Stay in bed."

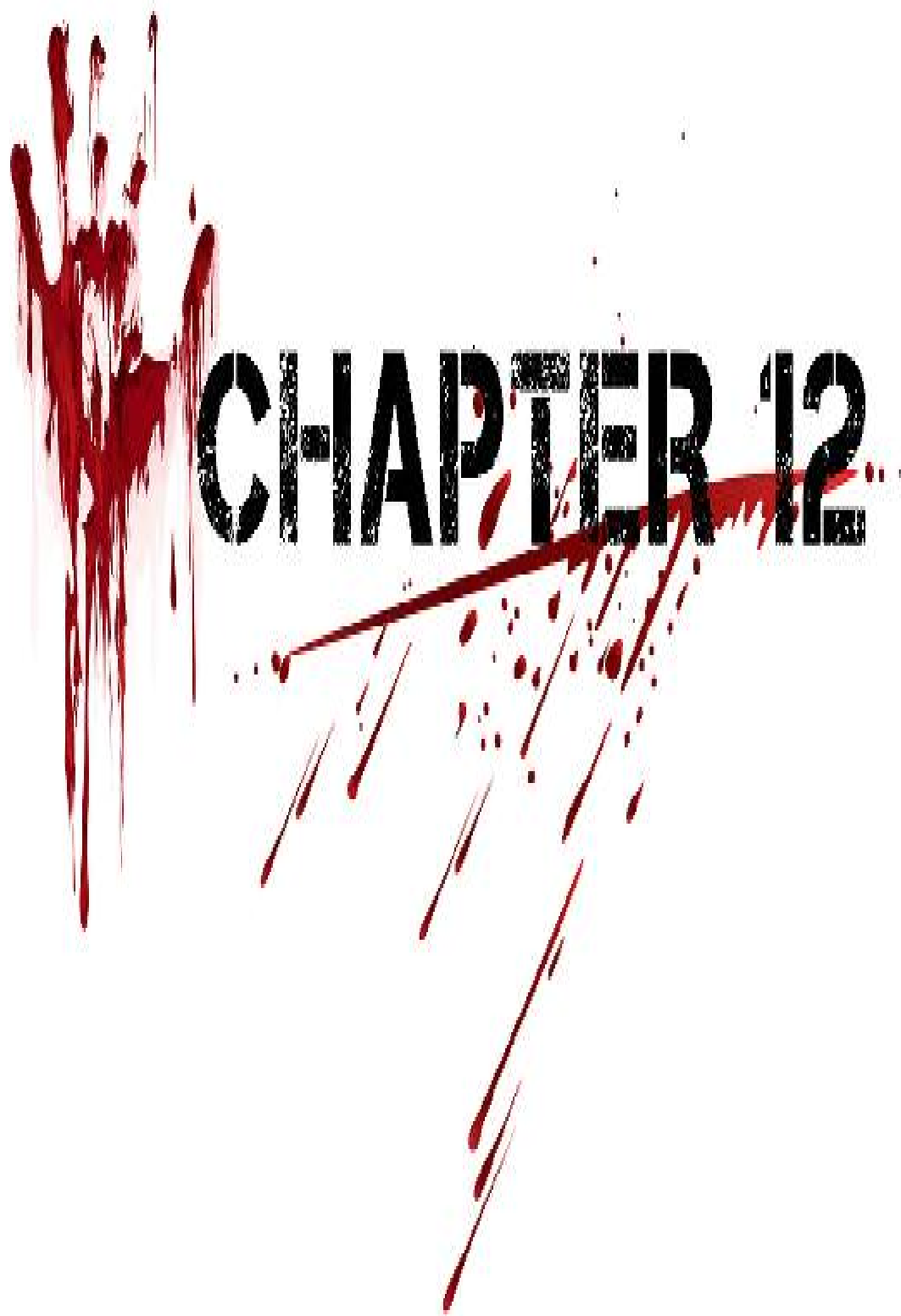
"Slater doesn't want a doctor." Metal resounded in the ripper's voice, but Talha had already decided on what to do next.

"I don't care what you want. You need antibiotics. You need someone to remove the dead tissues from the wound, and you need a

fucking tetanus shot. If you want to stay in my house, you follow my orders.”







**PRESENT**

**ROCKING TO AND FRO**, Slater squatted down by Talha's side, watching the man sleep. His soul, shrinking and extending, trapped

the air in his lungs. His chest hurt, and he couldn't find the reason for his agitation.

*It would be so much easier if Master fucked her face. Why does Master refuse? Why does Master want to suffer?*

His thumb brushed over the top of his hot and swollen hand, pressing the pulsing burn. The jolting pain shot through his body, making him hiss and cringe, but it didn't bring any relief. He kept pressing, hoping that with time the pain would replace his agitation.

"Master doesn't want Slater. Master chose a woman over Slater..." Lips twitching in disgust, he whispered. "Slater was ready to do everything for Master. Slater slaughtered for Master. Slater blindly followed Master. Slater did everything Master asked. If Master wished, Slater would drown the world in blood and fire... Yet Slater wasn't good enough. Why, Master?"

His left palm landed on Camilla's head, caressed her tangled hair.

"Why is a woman better? Because of children, Master?" He cocked his head, considering. "Slater can steal as many children as Master wants."

He scratched his cheek with his right hand and rolled his head to the other side.

"No... Who wants children? Children are annoying... They are messy. Master doesn't like messy. If not for children, then why?"

Unable to find the answer within himself, he shot a glance at Talha's blood-covered wrists, dry, pale skin that had lost its gloss, and black stubble. His attention, sliding down the muscular stomach, reached the dark hair in his groin and a soft, long cock that slept curling to the left. Saliva flooded Slater's mouth, and he hurriedly swallowed.

*Master was so hot inside...* He bit his lower lip, remembering Talha's eyes, full of pain. Desire sparked in his belly, warming his face.

*No. If Slater wants Master, Slater can't kill Master. Slater should stop... Master doesn't want Slater anymore. If Master doesn't want Slater, Master can't live. There is no way back. Slater has to kill Master. Master has to die.*

Despite his thoughts, Slater didn't move. Sitting there, he watched Talha's chest rise and fall with rhythmical, heavy breaths.



**SEVERE PAIN WRENCHED HIS CALF** in a seizure. Talha convulsed, limbs flapping against the ground. He needed air, but something prevented him from gasping. Panic, mixing with pain, shot his eyes open.

A red-stone ceiling... a weak glowing light filtered in from above... a gray, dusty floor... and the blue eyes of his tormentor, watching him with glowing hatred.

*Fuck...* Talha groaned. Sucking air through his nose, he shook his legs. Dehydration and complete immobility dried up his muscles, making them cramp. As soon as he curled his toes, vicious electric jolts shot down his right leg. He winced. Stretching his toes, he tried to absorb the pain. The pangs weakened; he rolled his head to the side, meeting Slater's glare.

Slater said nothing. Sitting by his right side on his toes, he resembled a creepy gargoyle sculpture. Camilla's grayish, rotting head stood by his side as his hand mechanically caressed her hair. His glare, glossy and immobile, made Talha wonder if the man could even see him. Talha groaned to attract Slater's attention. The ripper cocked his head, and a weird, painful grimace crawled up his face.

Slater's long fingers picked a tangled hank of Camilla's bloody hair, let the length slide between his fingers, before releasing

the strand; his vacant look never leaving Talha's face.

"Do you think it's fair, Talha?" His voice came out quiet. Talha frowned, alert to the rare serious notes in Slater's tone. "She was young, beautiful. She didn't have to die. Yet you killed her."

*What?* Talha growled at the accusation, but Slater's expression didn't change, only his lips stretched in a flat smile.

"You think I killed her, huh? But Master, everything I do, I do for you..." Lifeless, emotionless, Slater's voice sank through Talha's soul, infusing the bitter taste of hopelessness into his mouth. "Too bad you didn't want it... Now she is dead, and soon you will die too."

Slater's mouth slacked. Unshaved and untidy, he looked exhausted, and for a moment the kidnapping, torture, slaughter, and rape took second place in Talha's mind. His gaze searched the pallid, desperate face. Slater watched him expectantly as if Talha could solve every problem in the universe, like he'd always done.

*I wish I knew how to fix this, Slater...*

Under his gaze, Slater's cheek twitched, lips trembled, wrenching his facial muscles into a mask of agony and rage. In a blink of an eye, he got to his feet and his heavy boot connected with the side of Talha's ribs, then again and again. "Don't fucking look at me like this..."

Talha braced against the impact; dull pain spread from his side and stomach to his chest and lower belly. The air bounced in his lungs, suppressed by his strained muscles. The annoying, low noise of his blood vessels, buzzing with pressure, stuffed his ears, but he still refused to inhale, fearing once he let Slater kick through the shield of his muscles, he might never see the light again.

"Why are you looking at me like this?" Slater's lips quirked as he growled in a low voice before the toe of his boot knocked against Talha's left ear. "Don't look at me, look at your bitch! Pity her!"

The high-pitched shrill pierced the air, substituting Slater's heavy breathing. The room blurred, spiraling out of control. His head rolled to the side, leveling with Camilla's dead glare as his eyelids grew heavy, and the darkness swallowed him up.



**“FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!”** Slater cursed, watching blood stream from Talha’s split brow. His chest spasmed and contorted, too tight to contain any air. His nails dug into his skin over his heart and clawed down, then again and again, attempting to ease the pain, but it only intensified.

*Slater needs pain. Slater can control himself. Slater just needs pain.* His other hand sank into his hair as he spun around, avoiding looking at Talha. *No. No. No. Master should die. Master deserved it. Die. Die. Die!*

Grinding his teeth, he crashed his fists against the wall. Pouring the fire of anger and dissatisfaction into the short, fast jabs, he scratched and burst his knuckles bloody, but the pain didn’t calm him, neither did it bring him that buzzing pleasure and excitement he had always rushed toward. It just hurt.

*No...* He got to his knees, shuffled up to Talha’s face. His palms sliding up the unshaved cheeks, he rolled Talha’s face to himself, noticing the tiny stream of blood seeping from Talha’s ear. *Nooo...*

“Master has always been stupid,” he said, slumping to the side on his hip and curling into a ball by Talha’s side. The cold ground grated his skin and made him shiver. He shuffled closer to

his master to snatch a little bit of his warmth. He remembered the first time he'd seen Talha. His face had been covered with blood, just like now. Back then, Talha had smelled like sun and dust, blood and gunpowder. Now, everything around bathed in the stench of death, making it impossible to say how Talha smelled today.

He smirked, as the memory unwrapped. Walking into that room, Talha had no idea how close he had been to death.

That night Slater had celebrated his freedom. Completely letting go, he'd allowed the need to kill to overtake him. The same moment Slater heard three pairs of legs hurrying down the corridor, his hand automatically brushed up his thigh and extracted three throwing needles out of the loops.

He'd heard the door being opened and panting filling the air. He smelled their confusion and felt their wary glances all over his back, but he wasn't in a hurry to kill, enjoying the attention.

Someone who hadn't been his master commanded him to turn around and throw his hands in the air. He'd been curious to see the face of a man, who for some reason, decided that he had the right to order Iblīs around.

So Slater turned.

Hiding behind his gun and a bulletproof vest, the man in command had no idea that with a single flick of his hand, Slater could have finished them all. At that moment, only the liquid amber of Talha's curious eyes stopped Slater from sending the throwing needles at their throats.

Instead, he'd waited. The more he listened to Talha talk, the more intrigued he had become, so he agreed to the stupid deal and even followed the man to his house.

At first, Slater hadn't treated him seriously. Curious and bored, he'd watched Talha's every move, expecting him to make a mistake, and Talha hadn't disappointed. Time after time, he'd done something to irritate Slater, yet he hadn't killed him. Slater couldn't explain why. Maybe because Talha had been different from all of his former masters, or maybe because Talha entertained him. So many times in his life, Slater had spent hours on the floor, sleeping in pools of his bloody piss, because he hadn't been able to get up. Slater had never complained. More than that, he'd learned to enjoy pain, but Talha had never hit hard. Even administering punishment, Talha's focus had always been on Slater, constantly questioning if he did what Slater needed, if Slater could take it.

Many times Slater had questioned how such a person could have gained power. Unlike his ex-masters, Talha didn't solely rely on fear and cruelty, so why had people listened to him, respected him? Slater did his best to test the limits of his tolerance, every time expecting the man to lose his self-control, and show his true face. Talha never had. No matter what Slater had done, Talha hadn't rejected him and had never been cruel or unjust.

Slater's finger brushed over his lips, as he remembered the uncertain kiss Talha had forced upon him and how he'd hit him the next instance, realizing what he had done and hoping that pain would distract Slater and make him forget. Slater had never forgotten.

For a long time, Slater had known that Master got weaker. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, Talha had brushed his lips against Slater's. At first, Slater hadn't known how to react. Thrown from cold to hot, he'd itched to confront Talha, but every time he was about to bring the topic up, his lips stayed glued. The way Master watched him, treated his body after sex, and cared for Slater's wounds. Everything Master had done made Slater feel revolted toward the same weakness that twitched in his own chest. At some point, Slater started thinking that maybe he could tolerate becoming Master's only weakness or that Master would be Slater's only weakness. Corrupted with kindness, Slater was ready to throw his principles away. For Master.

*But Master chose a woman.*

"Why?" Talha's cold skin seared him with incandescent heat, and Slater shuffled away to the wall, got on all fours. Watching the side of the slack face, Slater asked again, "Why Master chose a woman? Why not Slater? Slater has done everything for Master."

Talha didn't answer, so Slater got up and strolled out of the chamber. When he returned, he carried a soft cloth and a tin bucket brimming with water. Putting it on the floor by Talha's side, he dropped to his knees and undid the ropes spreading Talha's legs apart. His hands worked fast, wiping Talha's body. Starting from his head, he made his way down the stomach, then cleaned his groin. Washing his legs last, he gave them a slight massage, to restart the blood circulation.

Finished, he splashed the dirty water out of the door and fished a water bottle out of his backpack. Approaching Talha, he squatted by his side and wiped the drying blood that now barely seeped out of Talha's split brow. He wavered for a second before

unscrewing the lid and lifting Talha's head, ripped the duct tape off his lips, then brought the bottle to his mouth.



**THE TINY, ANNOYING NOISE DRILLED** through the numbness of Talha's consciousness and irritated his nerves. He scrunched his face, fighting the heavy fog in his ears and head, then unglued his eyes.

Examining his surroundings, he heaved a sigh. The ropes around his legs had disappeared. He bent his knees, and his eyelids dropped from the simple pleasure the free movement provided. Feeling the blood streaming through his veins, he moved his toes up and down, before opening his eyes again. The ropes around his wrists had loosened up, not enough for one hand to catch the other or to reach his mouth, but the length allowed him to roll to his side. Grazing the wall, his gaze stumbled over the powerful frame of the ripper. With his back pressed to Talha's hip, he lay on his side, but no matter how many times Talha called for him, he never reacted. A few wisps of his hair rested in blood, but Slater didn't look like he cared.

"Ugh-ur!" Talha called again, but the younger man only brought his head closer to his chest and hugged his middle.



Slater had always been difficult to talk to. Five years ago, it took Talha many weeks and a lot of patience to understand Slater's needs, and many more to discover his past.

Slater couldn't recall much from his early childhood, but he'd remembered his first master and the severe training he'd undergone. How, day after day, he and a few other kids had learned how to process pain and tolerate torture; how to use all kinds of weapons, and how to kill. Starting with stray and wild animals, they learned how to let go of their fears. Slater didn't stutter as he told Talha about the dozens of pets he trained and later murdered to learn emotional control. Slater hadn't appeared upset or hurt by the memories, as if things like this had been something natural.

A drunken fisherman who hadn't paid his debts was his first contract, and had started a long chain of butchered victims, awakening Slater's appetite for human murder. Like all the animals he'd killed, Slater gutted the man and put his organs on a fishing rack to dry under the scorching sun of the Philippines. Slater had been ten.

At the age of fourteen, Slater had been sold to a Mexican drug cartel, but he didn't stay there long. After killing his master, he sneaked onto the cruise ship that brought him to America, where he stayed for six months, before stowing away on another ship bound for Europe.

Changing his masters, he had never found what he searched for. When Talha asked him why he even needed a master, Slater only grinned, replying that he needed to be controlled, but it took Talha too long to understand what that meant.



## **5 YEARS AGO**

**“WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?”** Talha stormed into the spare bedroom. His ears rang with the blood storm that swirled in his core. The news on TV explained in every juicy detail about Iblīs slaughtering the whole Asani household, except the kids, who likely stayed in a summer camp.

Storming toward the bed, Talha seized Slater’s arm and dragged him to the floor. Considering granting Slater with a kick, he wavered, remembering the wound in his side that had taken the medical team an hour to treat. His fist clenched, unclenched, then clenched again, before his knuckles collided with Slater’s cheekbone.

“I told you to kill Bekir, not to slaughter everyone! Who do you think you are?”

“Iblīs, Master,” Slater snarled, exposing his teeth.

“You are useless if you can’t kill only one person. I needed an assassination, a message, not a mass murder! I don’t need the reputation of being a bloody psychopath who butchers kids and women. I need the strongest to fear me, not the weakest. This is politics, you idiot! I spend millions gaining a clean, strong reputation, so people would stay loyal and respect me for being fair,

and you fucking ruin it in one day by marring my hands with the blood of innocents.”

“No one is innocent, Master.” Looking up at him from the floor, Slater didn’t attempt to get up. “The woman knew Slater. The staff knew Slater. Master is still young and naive, but Master will understand that Slater couldn’t let them live. Slater did it for Master. Now no one will come for Master. Master craved power. Master can have his territories.”

Taken aback with the sudden flow of words, Talha said, “You have only been here for a few days, and already you’ve managed to fuck over everything you touch!”

*Why do I even argue?* Talha wondered. He could have drawn a gun and sent a bullet between those crystal eyes, finishing this madness, yet he didn’t.

“Things change, Master. Get used to it. What did you expect when you decided to deal with Iblīs?”

Something quivered in the pit of Talha’s stomach. Something similar to doubt. *What is the price of his loyalty? He butchered Behçet; he will easily kill everyone in this house once he decides to move on. He is insane. Dinçer was right; I should have killed him in that mosque. He has no moral compass at all. He can’t be reasoned with. What does the word Master mean if he doesn’t listen to anything I say?*

Searching for answers, Talha let his gaze wander over the cream carpet toward the tall window, draped with golden curtains. The sun filtered in through the dense foliage of the apple tree lavish with ripe, red fruits.

*Maybe, he thinks I don’t deserve to be his master. Maybe he doesn’t respect me enough to follow my orders. Was I stupid to think that I can control Iblīs? I wanted to have him before anyone else could. At that moment, I didn’t care how I would have to pay for it. What did I expect? I don’t know. Nothing like this. Yet, he served Behçet for more than three years. That’s a lot of time. It means Slater can be loyal. What did that asshole have that I’m lacking?*

Absorbing the blue, cloudless sky that hung above the tree, Talha queried, “Why did you kill Behçet?”

“Simple, Master. Behçet got weak. Behçet set a low trap. Behçet was scared and didn’t leave Talha a chance. A coward doesn’t deserve Iblīs.”

Spinning around, Talha granted him with a questioning look. The words left his mouth before he could stop them, “You don’t respect me, do you?”

A curious glint, one that had been missing for a long time, returned to Slater’s eyes as he cocked his head to the side. “Huh, Master isn’t all that stupid after all. No, but... did Master do anything to deserve Slater’s respect?”

*So that’s what it is.* Despite Slater’s words, the ripper didn’t attempt to get up. The contradictive vibes he emitted messed with Talha’s mind. *If that’s the truth, why are you still on the floor? Why did you allow me to hit you? I don’t get you...*

“Fair enough...” Talha ground his teeth, making a decision. “If I earn your respect, would you do as I say? Would you be loyal? Would you listen to me?”

Slater’s head went down, but his eyes shot up a predatory, animalistic glare. “Certainly, Master.”

“You stay here and rest. Food will be served at your demand. If you need something, use the intercom.” Saying this, Talha left the room, locking the door behind his back.



**THE NIGHT STRETCHED INTO ETERNITY.** Trying to shake off the pressure of the last days, Talha found consolation in alcohol, weed, and women as he'd always done when he needed to relax. But even the sweet embrace of Aylín hadn't been able to calm him for long, and soon enough, he found himself strolling through the night in the ancient city. Alcohol buzzed in his head, fermenting his blood. He lost track of time and his whereabouts, until after another turn, the familiar form of his mansion greeted him.

Slamming the front door open with his palm, he spared the new security guard, who had been propping the wall, a glance. "Ayaz, I left my car at Aylín's. Pick it up."

Without waiting for a reply, he moved to the wall, intending to use it for support. The marble staircase doubled and shook, and every step he took felt like a Sisyphean toil because the steep steps refused to end. For a second, he considered taking a rest but forced through the exhaustion and took another step, then one more. The staircase ended. Impressed with his achievement, he looked down from the peak of the conquered height.

"U-u-u-u..." The breathtaking view from the oh so tall 'Everest' disappointed and didn't look all that high anymore. It swayed, jumped, and spiraled out of control. Losing his balance, he flapped his arms in the air and slumped to the floor.

"Are you okay, Reis?" Ayaz asked, looking perplexed. He made a step toward Talha but froze.

"Do I look like I'm not okay?" Talha squeezed his eyes, then opened them again, trying to subdue the swirling room. His right foot burned from his long walk, so he lifted his leg and took one shoe off. Slipping out of his hands, the shoe rolled down the staircase. Talha snorted.

"No?"

Satisfied with this reply, Talha removed his other shoe and deliberately dumped it down, wanting to see if it would land close to the first one. But the liquid voice coming from behind drew his attention, and he forgot why he had been staring down the staircase.

"Master is drunk..."

The remains of energy Talha was fighting to contain left his body. He fell back, sprawling his arms wide on the cold marble floor.

“I locked you...” Talha remembered. He rubbed his temple with his fingers, then pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to concentrate. “Did you break the lock?”

“No need, Master. There is no lock Slater can’t open.”

“Do you know why locks exist?”

“Master is talking funny. Master needs to get in bed. Slater will help.” Slater bent forward, trying to catch Talha’s arm, but the man deflected his hand away with his own.

“No fucking way... You are a freak! There is no-o way I’m going anywhere with you. You are creepy! You need therapy! Ayaz, shoot him if he tries anything.”

Slater sniggered, rubbing the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand as his shoulders rocked.

“I’ll take him to his room,” Slater said to the security guard. The next moment, iron fingers clasped around Talha’s biceps. “Come on, Reis, get up.”

“No-o. Ayaz, shoot him!” Talha protested, but Ayaz didn’t move. “Why does no one listen to me? Am I Reis or not? Get the fuck out, traitor, you are fired!”

“Easy, Master...” Slater hissed, jerking him upright. Before Talha understood what was going on, his arm wound around Slater’s shoulder.

In a heartbeat, his fighting spirit evaporated as all his attention concentrated on the simple task of walking. The dark gray carpet of the corridor changed into the Persian carpets of his bedroom. The room swirled before his eyes, and the mattress bounced under his back before swallowing his weight with blissful softness.

“You reek!” Slater said, and Talha wondered if he heard irritation in his voice.

“You reek!” Talha couldn’t say why he snarled it back, but he was too tired to analyze himself. With a flick of his wrist, he dismissed Slater. “Go away!”

“Master is acting ridiculous.” Slater’s hands seized his collar and unfastened the top button.

“Yeah? Slaughter me for it...” Two angry hands ripped his shirt open, and Talha thought he sobered up enough to have a

serious, man to man conversation. “I asked myself why, and you know why?”

“Why what, Master?”

“Why this is...” Talha twirled his index finger in the air, trying to remember what he wanted to say, but lost his thought. Instead, his palm cupped the side of Slater’s face. “Who could say this face belongs to a monster...”

His thumb outlined Slater’s cheekbone, brushed against his lips, pulling the bottom one down.

“With such a beautiful face you could have been an actor or a model. You are smarter than you try to appear. You could have been anyone. Instead, you became my curse...”

Talha laughed, staring into the dilated pupils. The softening line of Slater’s mouth stretched his face in a stupidly-surprised grimace.

“I can’t even kill you, no matter how much you annoy me. I have been thinking about it all night, and I realized something...” He groaned, scrunched his face, then said, “Wait, I think I’m gonna puke...” Nausea passed. Talha raised his hand in the air. “No, I’m good.”

“Master realized something?” Slater’s ears twitched, straining his facial muscles.

“I did? What was it?”

“You just said it...”

“Ohhh... Yeah...” Talha rubbed his tired eye, looking at Slater with only the left one open. “I don’t have the right to kill you, because I don’t think you have ever had a choice about what you became... Some bastard stole your life and made you... this.” He pointed at Slater. “Death with an angel face. I wish I know who did this to you. All those scars... I wonder if you have ever been treated normally? How can I kill someone who had never been given a chance to live a normal life? You could have a beautiful wife, lots of kids, you know?”

“Slater doesn’t like women or kids.” A weird expression crossed Slater’s face. Talha’s drunken mind was unable to identify it. But it looked like a twisted amusement.

“A man? Whatever, I don’t wanna know...” Talha shook his head. “Tonight, when I’ve been with Aylín, I finally realized why I

met you. Because I'm the only one who is right for you. Not a sick psycho who tells you to slaughter women and children, not some sick sadist who enjoys doing this..." He stretched out his hand and tugged down the collar of Slater's gray t-shirt, having a glimpse at the white rash of old cigarette burns. "You need to be given a chance. And, maybe, for everything I've done, I have to pay. You are my punishment, my curse because I'm not sure you will ever appreciate what I offer you. However, I have decided to try anyway... as long as you give me the chance."

Slater opened his mouth, then closed it. Licking his lips, he swallowed. With his eyes glossy and deep, decorated with long black lashes Slater looked young. *Too young to be a monster. This could have been Ejder...*

"Go and sleep, Slater. Master is tired."

"Slater stays here..." A hoarse voice lacked the liquid intonation, but Talha was too tired to look for a meaning in it.

"Whatever you please." He flicked his wrist in the air again, and closed his eyes, welcoming the heavy wave of sleep.

That night, Talha dreamed about Slater tugging off his pants, then his trunks. Face red, he positioned himself between Talha's legs and commented, "You reek of a woman..."

"Sorry, I'll take a shower." Talha frowned, tried to get up, but Slater's strong hand, pressing against his chest, pinned him down.

"It's okay, Master. Slater doesn't mind."

Then Talha dreamed about the hot softness of Slater's mouth and a sweet tingling sensation in his groin, foretelling his building orgasm. Slater, suddenly naked, straddled him. Moving his hips, he lowered himself over Talha's length with a painful hiss.

Talha forgot how to breathe, mesmerized, as every muscle in Slater's body, following silent music, moved in a wild rhythm of an entrancing dance. Unable to tear his gaze away, he drunk Slater in. He seized strong hips. The flesh under his fingers whitened as his tongue buzzed with a desire to lean closer and taste Slater's sultry skin.

Face red, lips parted, Slater slanted to the side, grabbed a cigarette pack and a lighter. Talha couldn't say where they came from as he didn't smoke cigarettes, but as in any dream, events didn't have to be logical. Slater sucked in acrid smoke, held it inside, and a bliss relaxed his facial muscles. His nostrils emitted a heavy



rush of smoke, and Talha couldn't help but joke, "I thought Iblis was made of smokeless fire."

Slater chuckled, looking down at him with something similar to affection. His lips stretched in a wicked smile, and the mood changed. Grabbing Talha's hand, Slater shoved a cigarette between Talha's fingers, then guided his hand toward his chest, crushing the smoldering tip against his own skin.

"No, what are you doing?" Talha cringed as his chest contracted with empathic pain.

"It's okay. Master misunderstood. Slater wants it. Slater loves it."

Talha tried to tear his hand away, but Slater's iron grip held his hand until the skin sizzled.

Gathering all his strength, Talha forced his hand out of Slater's grip and crushed the cigarette in his fist. The dream changed its course once again, and now he was holding Slater's body in his arms, kissing and licking the salty burn, until the darkness swallowed them both.



**TALHA JERKED UPRIGHT**, gasping for air. The unsettling sound and the disgusting smell of burning skin wrenched his

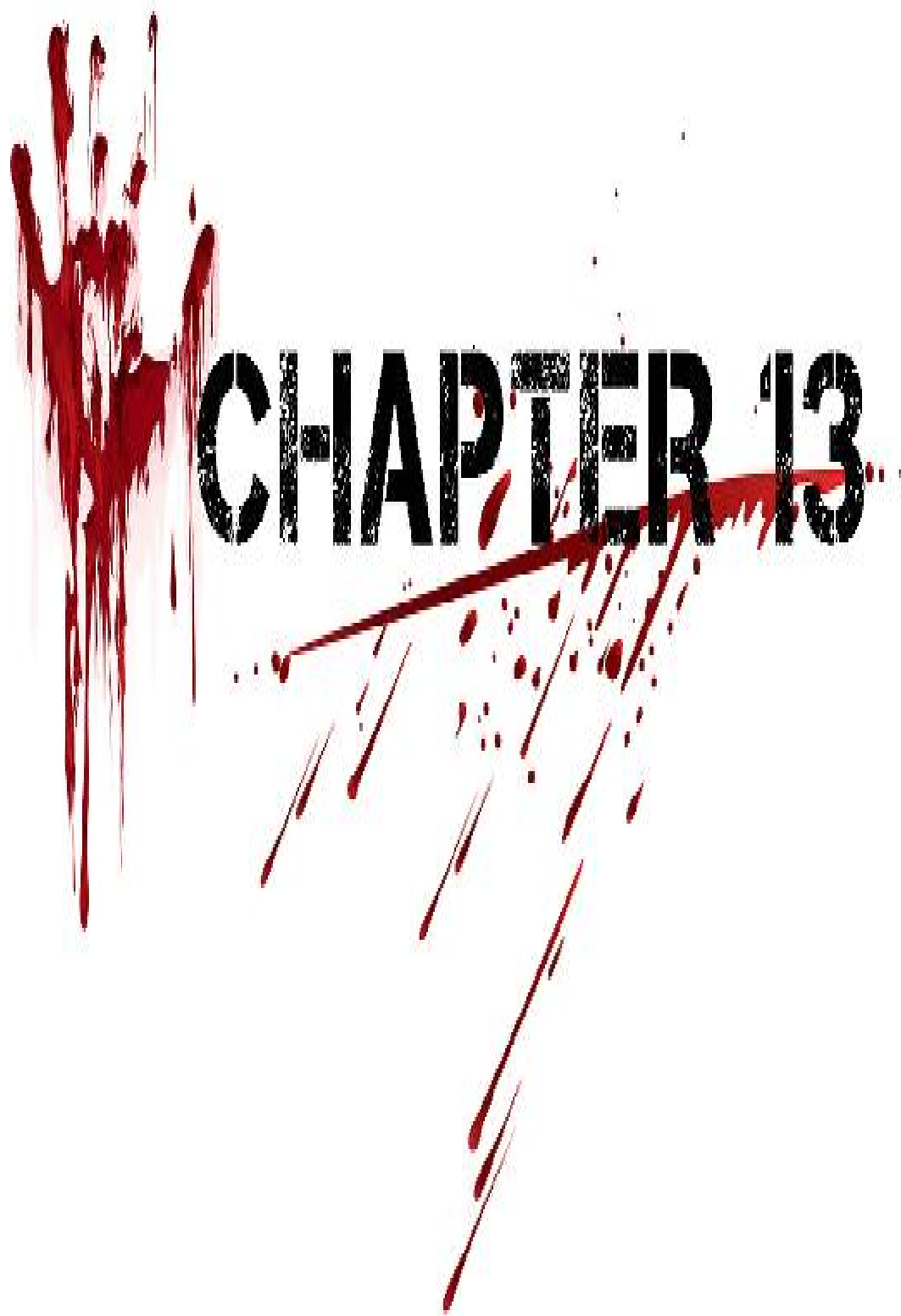
stomach.

“Fuck this dream...” he breathed the exact moment the door to his room flew open, and Ejder’s face whitened.

“Abi? What the hell is going on?”

Following his gaze, Talha faced the other side of his bed, where the naked frame of Slater sprawled on the crumpled linens. Slowly, as if still in a dream, Talha raised his palm where the cigarette burn marked his skin. “Fuck my life...”





# CHAPTER 13

**“I SAID, I DON’T KNOW** how it happened!” Talha snapped at Ejder. Sitting on a brown and white cowhide sofa, Talha shoved a morning paper off a dark wood coffee table to the black wooden floor. Grabbing a jar of weed from the shelf behind his back, he

hurriedly rolled up a joint dying with the need to calm his nerves. “Anyway, I don’t want to talk about it. It was a drunken mistake and will not happen again.”

He shook his head, thrusting the thoughts about last night out of his mind, but gut-wrenching nausea clutched his stomach.

“Ugh, fuck. I’m gonna puke...” he groaned, clasp ing his mouth with his free hand then demanded, “Give me something! My head is killing me.”

“Is Master unwell?” Talha cringed as Slater’s voice scratched his ears. He hadn’t heard the door to his office open, and still naked, Slater made his way in.

Talha’s eyes fixed on the round, angry-red burn glowing on Slater’s chest, then slipped down to the red soaked bandage and the blue bruises from his grip that decorated Slater’s hips. Guilt, regret, confusion, and anger joined in a soul-destroying conflagration. Unable to deal with it, he pointed to the door. “You. Get the fuck out and stay in the bedroom, or I swear to God, I’ll kill you! I don’t know what happened last night, but I don’t want to discuss it. Is it clear?”

“Is Master mad?” Slater cocked his head.

“Mad? I’m fucking furious!”

“Why?” Slater’s head snapped to the other side.

“You...” Darkness swallowed the corners of Talha’s vision as the need to regain control overwhelmed. Fists itching to smash this beautiful face bloody, he crushed the joint in his hand, got up, and stepped forward, but caught the surprised, curious gaze of his younger brother. Ejder looked entertained, rather than worried. Not willing to amuse him, Talha leashed his feelings and said as clear as possible, “Stay in the room and wait for the doctor. I can’t deal with you right now. We will talk later.”

Slater’s face paled, eyes frosted over, lips disappeared in a white slash as he straightened up and raised his chin. “As you please, Master.”

Slater strolled away, and Ejder gasped. “WOW! Have you seen his back?”

“Ejder!” Talha warned, but the words didn’t seem to disturb Slater.

Watching the ripper approach the door and slip into the corridor, Talha expected the all-consuming shame to lift from his chest, but instead, it aggravated.

“What are you going to do, Abi?”

“I don’t know...” Talha automatically replied, giving in to despair for a second. Slater’s appearance robbed him of the desire to smoke, and he tossed the crumpled joint on the table.

“You slept with a man.”

“Really? Thank you, I wouldn’t have noticed without your help. Ugh, Ejder! What the fuck is wrong with you?” Succumbing to the rage, Talha kicked the table. His toes collided with the edge of the table leg, and Talha hissed as all his nerves shrieked in agony. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

“If people knew, they wouldn’t only stop following you, they would kill you, ya know?”

“Then fucking keep your mouth shut!” Talha yelled, then pushed the air out of his lungs, trying to calm down. Hammers of pain pounding in his brain, he said, “Remove everybody from the house until I sort it all out. Arrange a doctor for him. If he has any kind of diseases, I want to know. Stay at your girlfriend’s for now. If he kills me, kill him, then return to Mardin. He won’t let those who know who he is live.”

Ejder didn’t listen. His eyes lit up with mischief. “How did it feel? Did you... or did he...”

Unable to believe his ears, Talha felt as if the blood vessels in his brain burst. “Are you for real? Get the fuck out!”

“It’s only as serious as you let it be, Abi. So what if you fucked his ass. Shit happens!” He giggled, happy with his joke, but Talha didn’t listen. Grabbing Ejder’s arm, he dragged him to the door and shoved him out of the office.

“Ugh! Unbelievable!”



**HIS HOUSE EMPTIED** within half an hour. No footfalls, no rustles of long abayas sounded in the air; dead silence fell over his never sleeping mansion. Talha's neurotic fingers tapped the polished wood of the armrest as he rested against the soft leather of the cowhide sofa. Holding the morning paper in his other hand, he tried to concentrate on reading, but the meaning eluded him. When he was about to give up, a soft knocking reached his ears a second before the door creaked open.

Serious brown eyes fixed on Talha's face from behind thin silver glasses as the middle-aged doctor gave him a quick nod and a ghost of a smile. Even on hot summer days like this, the doctor wore a dark blue suit; the same blue bloomed on his forehead as a prayer mark. Closing the door behind his back, he clasped his hands in front of his hips. "No one answered the door, so I let myself in. Is everything alright, Reis?"

"Yes, everything is fine, Miraç. Come on in." Tossing the paper to the coffee table, Talha got up, straightened his black button-up shirt, before offering the doctor his hand. "You know why you're here?"

"Yes, Reis." Soft, velvet notes in Miraç's calm voice wrapped around Talha, releasing the tension from his shoulders. The

doctor's glasses flared green as he gave Talha a firm nod. "Ejder updated me. You want a whole body check-up of your new asset."

Calm and controlled, Miraç feared no one but Allah, and Talha thought that if anyone could deal with Slater, it would be him. The peaceful aura around Miraç never failed to make people relax and instantly trust him. "The second door on the left. I'm not sure how I'm going to use him yet, but if he has any kind of diseases, I would like to know."

"Yes, Reis." Turning on his heel, the doctor opened the door, picked up a beige medical chest, which stood behind, and disappeared from view. His quiet footfalls moved away, until the sound of the door being opened and closed completely muffled them out.

Leaning against the wooden surface of the windowsill, Talha watched the white featherlike clouds rush toward the horizon. The blinding sun hurt his eyes, yet he couldn't look away from the endless sky. The pressure of waiting weighed him down, as he strained his ears for any sounds from Slater's room. Fifteen minutes stretched into eternity, exhausting his patience. He was about to follow Miraç, when the soft click of a closing door disturbed the quiet. Talha pushed himself off the windowsill, facing the noise.

Putting the medical chest on the floor in the corridor, Miraç entered the room, and after glancing in the direction he had come from, he shut the door. Brushing his salt and pepper hair off his forehead with a casual hand, the doctor offered Talha a tight smile.

"I changed his bandages and left him antibiotics. Though the wound isn't dangerous and is healing well, he should rest for at least another week. I took some blood samples as well." The doctor's masculine features tightened as his eyes searched the ceiling, then the floor, before reaching Talha's face again. "I was unable to collect all the samples for STDs as Ejder requested."

The doctor cleared his throat, adjusting his blue tie.

Talha frowned. "Why?"

Miraç spread his arms, then lifted his shoulders. "Let me quote. 'If you touch my ass, old man, I'll cut off your hands and feed them to dogs. If Master wants to push fingers up my ass, Master should come and do it himself.' I'm sorry, Reis, but he didn't look like he was joking."

“Son of a bitch...” Blood, rushing to Talha’s head, made his vision murky. Pressure, pulsing in his temples and the back of his head, threatened to push his eyeballs out of their sockets. His fists clenched, teeth ground, as he stormed toward the door, but Miraç shifting left, blocked his way.

“There is a reason why there are no people around today, is that right? I saw the autopsy reports of the Asani family, and I just saw a knife in the hands of your new ‘asset’, that could be the murder weapon. Please correct me if I’m making the wrong conclusions.”

Talha said nothing, so Miraç continued, “If you allow me to give you a piece of advice, Reis, it would be ‘leave him alone for now and cool down’. Hot-headed decisions never brought anyone prosperity.”

Staring into the dark, soft eyes, Talha felt painful pressure releasing in his jaw. Swallowing past the lumps in his throat, he jerked his cheek, reluctantly giving in. Miraç was right, as always, and his respect for the man grew stronger. Talha wasn’t someone to give in to his blind instincts. He knew better than anyone that pure violence never brought anyone anywhere, this was why he survived and prospered.

“Why don’t you come with me? Let’s have lunch.” A firm palm, wrapping around Talha’s elbow, guided him out of the room and toward the staircase.





**“YOU HAVE BEEN MISSING** for a week... Where have you been, Master?” Slater didn’t ask but demanded his reply.

Standing in the kitchen by a sizzling frying pan, Talha scrutinized the chopped parts of something that once might have been a bird, as he tried to collect his thoughts. Staying out of his own house had been stupid, but he couldn’t help it. All those days slamming balls deep into a pussy, Talha tried to cleanse himself of shame, guilt, and memories. He’d never been particularly homophobic, as he’d never cared about what anyone did as long as they didn’t cross his path, but that was before he’d slept with a man. He loved pussy and the softness of breasts. Never in his life had he desired to touch another man. *Then why the hell did I get hard with Slater?*

Ejder was right. Things were as complicated as he let them be, except they weren’t. This wasn’t only about sex. Shaking off his emotional turbulence, Talha decided to forget the whole episode, blaming it on his drunken state and Slater’s weird behavior. What he couldn’t shrug off as easily, was the impact it could have on his life. Even knowing that Ejder would never stop teasing him about sleeping with a man, he was sure there would be no leak from his side. Slater, on the other hand, could kill him with one word.

Slater's question hung in the air, and Talha realized that a week wasn't nearly enough for him to face the ripper and stay calm.

"None of your business. Anyway, why are you cooking claws?" Talha pointed at a bird foot, then to the cooked, brownish head. "Is it a beak?"

Instead of answering, Slater hissed, "Where is everybody, Master?"

"They won't be around for a while. Get used to it. If you don't want to cook—eat out."

"Why, Master? Why only you and Slater? Is it a trap?"

Talha almost choked on his saliva. Unable to tell if Slater was joking, he faced the reaper but met the dead-serious eyes and a strained, cautious pose. Slater backed to the wall, then lurked to the nearest window. With one jerky movement, he closed the blinds. Keeping away from openings, he curled his palm and tugged at a small loop that connected his middle finger to a wrist strap, ready to draw a needle out of its sheath.

*Does he think I want to put him down because we had a drunk fuck?* Shaking his head, Talha said, "No, Slater. If I ever want to kill you, I'd do it with my own hands. I sent people away because I don't know what to expect from you. I didn't want you to slaughter everybody. Until I know what's going on in your head, it will just be you and me here. Get used to cooking or starve—I don't care."

Emitting a weird, high-pitched sound, Slater grinned. "Master is funny." He took a plate and offered it to Talha. "Eat with me."

"Eat what, Slater? Whatever you are cooking, this dish should be censored. There's no way I'm trying..." Talha gave a suspicious look to the frying pan. "What on earth is it?"

"Your chickens, Master. They are terribly underfed."

"My chickens?" Talha faced the reaper. "I don't keep chickens."

"No, not anymore..."

Blood left Talha's face, as the realization hit him.

"You motherfucker, did you slaughter the whole pigeon loft?" His hand, shooting up, squeezed Slater's throat. Tripping the reaper's foot, Talha arched him backward and smashed the back of his head against the white marble island. His free hand found a fork

and brought it to Slater's eye. The reaper didn't blink. The reflection of the fork in his eye grew bigger, but his pupils didn't dilate, and not a single muscle in his body tensed. "You've reached the limit, Slater. They were my messenger pigeons. Do you know how much they cost and how long it takes to train them properly? They were long-distance ones! Name me one reason why I shouldn't put you down, you mad dog?"

"Messenger pigeons? Hmm, too bad they are gone now," Slater deadpanned, and Talha tightened the grip around his throat, as adrenaline hammered in his temples. Unlike his, Slater's pulse was even and calm under Talha's fingers as his glacial eyes stared back.

*He isn't scared of me at all... Is he this confident of himself?* Talha thought, collecting his thoughts. He wasn't one to easily lose his calm, yet Slater somehow always managed to irritate him. *I can't believe he murdered my pigeons.*

Lifting his chin to the fork, Slater added, "If Master is hungry, Master should eat. Slater waited. Slater cooked for two."

*Waited? For me?* The words confused Talha and wiped clean his anger. Pushing a breath out, he removed the fork. "If you were hungry, why didn't you go shopping?"

"Slater hates shopping. Slater hates crowded places. When Slater is irritated, Slater wants to kill," Slater hissed, his cheek twitched. Talha released his throat.

"You should have ordered delivery." Talha turned away, giving a sad look to his once beautiful birds.

"Slater hates delivery, and Slater doesn't have money." When the reaper voiced his next question, his warm breath tickled Talha's nape. "Slater hates cooking too. Can Master cook?"

His tone never dropped the demanding notes and awakened another tornado of irritation in Talha's chest.

"You have some nerve... I'm considering killing you here. What on Earth makes you think I'm going to cook for you?" Talha swirled, linking their gazes.

"Master sent people away. It's Master's fault we have no food. Master is cooking, right?" Without waiting for Talha's reply, Slater drew out his karambit, hooked the nearest pigeon piece and placed it onto the plate he still held in his hand. "Slater cooked today. You cook tomorrow, right?"

“I don’t want your cooking.” Talha choked, exasperated.

“Too bad we have nothing else. If you don’t eat them, does it mean they died for nothing, Master?” Giving Talha an innocent look, Slater cocked his head, then handed the plate with the remains of a poor pigeon to Talha. “Eat.”

Grabbing another plate, Slater snatched two more pieces of pigeon before strolling away.

*Unfuckinbelievable...* Talha tried to remain mad, but couldn’t. For some reason, this childish behavior made Slater seem a little more human.

Approaching the island, Slater took one of the tall stools. Using his karambit, he picked up a pigeon piece and sank his teeth into the caramelized meat.

The question came unexpected, “Why was Master angry the other day?”

*Fuck...* Talha winced. A part of his soul hoped that Slater would stay clear of the topic and the sharp moment would pass quietly.

“Because I want to forget what happened that night. I would appreciate never talking about it again.”

“Why?”

Everything irritated. Grabbing a fork, Talha stabbed his pigeon piece with it then gave it a scornful look. “Because it was a mistake. It should never be repeated.”

“Why?”

“Because I like pussy, not cock!”

“Hmm... Master didn’t complain. Master touched Slater. Master licked Slater. Master was hard. Master felt good. Master came three times. Why is Master angry now?” Dropping a karambit on the plate, Slater snarled.

“Because this isn’t what I want.” Tossing the plate on the counter, Talha turned off the stove and said, “You can have a second helping. Don’t come into my room.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so! I don’t care who you fuck, but it can’t be me! I can’t imagine myself getting involved in a relationship with a

man!” Talha slammed his hand against the white marble kitchen counter. “Can you fucking respect this?”

“Relationship?” Slater echoed and tugged at his left earlobe, then giggled. “Master is funny. So innocent... Slater doesn’t do relationships. Slater just wants to fuck.”

Dropping his attention to his plate, Slater picked up his karambit again, flipped it around his fingers before stabbing a piece of pigeon with the edge.

“Is that so?” Talha narrowed his eyes. “Then find yourself another object for your needs, and we will be good.”

Putting the frying pan aside, Talha strolled to the door.

“Oh, we will be good.” Slater grinned with his mouth full, but Talha suspected that Slater’s good was totally different from his.



**WALKING THROUGH THE DARK**, empty mansion felt weird, creepy even. Never before had Talha noticed the vastness of his home. Too many rooms, too much space. Always surrounded by people, he had forgotten the meaning of solitude, and the knowledge that the only person in the mansion was a psycho didn’t ease his discomfort.

*If I don't sort this shit out, we will drown in dirt and dust... I wonder if he even washed the dishes.*

The clock on the wall pointed to twelve, leaving Talha with nothing much to do. After Slater destroyed the remains of the Asani family, the streets quieted down and didn't need much of his involvement. Delegating control over seizing the new territories to Ejder, he had to start developing a new business strategy to open a channel to Europe, but he was too lazy to think about it today. Grabbing a book, he shuffled into his bedroom. Getting comfortable in his bed, he flipped the pages of the autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi Ejder had jokingly gifted him on his birthday. He was about to close the book, when his eyes stumbled over the line, '*Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will.*'

Even though Talha knew it already, the line made him think. Any idiot could fire a gun and break bones. Fear, so often confused with respect, could never grant true power. The ones who follow out of fear were in a constant search for a way out. That thought, once again, brought him to Iblīs.

Slater feared no human, no god. He didn't look like death scared him either, then why had he served Behçet? Though Behçet was a dangerous man, he relied solely on physical force and cruelty. If so, what had he done to keep Slater under control for three years? What did Talha lack that Behçet had?

Behçet had been a ruthless and greedy man. He'd never compromised to gain allies but slaughtered those who had the pride to reject his offers. Behçet constantly used Slater to eliminate everyone in his way. People were terrified to refuse him anything. Whenever he visited a restaurant, everything he'd ordered had always been on the house. The man, who built his Empire on fear, died at the hands of his own weapon.

*Why? Why did Behçet set a trap, rather than using Slater against me?*

Not sure what to think, Talha directed the course of his thoughts another way.

He didn't need to drown the world in blood to create an empire of fear. Unlike Behçet, he didn't need people to fear him solely because he had Iblīs. He needed people to fear and respect him for who he was, for what he could do, and because Iblīs served him. Internal wars never brought prosperity and often wasted

resources and people without any result. Talha didn't like them. He wanted people to cooperate, knowing they could earn more if they work for him or with him. He needed Iblīs to put down mad dogs who didn't understand the voice of reason, not to butcher everyone who didn't agree with him. Iblīs should be a message, not a weapon, only then would the name Talha Demir not dim in the overpowering reputation of Iblīs.

Iblīs should strengthen him, not to make him look weaker, and for that, Slater needed to respect him. *How do you make someone who has no moral compass at all respect, follow, and obey you? What does Slater value?*

After fighting with his thoughts for another hour and never finding answers, he flipped the book closed and switched the lights off.



**THE DEAFENING SILENCE** accompanied him on his way to the kitchen, as his bare feet slapped over the carpet, then the cold marble floor. His stomach rumbled with hunger, and Talha regretted not ordering delivery.

The bluish light of the full moon, sneaking into the window, lavished the marble island. The fork he'd used to threaten Slater still lay teeth up, glinting in the night. Falling into the trap the glint

provided, his eyes refused to move, as his thoughts trailed to Slater and the slaughtered pigeon loft.

*First the head, then sex, now pigeons... What's next? What does he want? The doubt scratched in his chest. How can I control him if I don't understand him? Maybe I should kill him. He served his purpose. The Asani Cartel is a matter of past. The road to Europe is open. I don't really need him.*

He shook himself out of the growing rigor, and blinked away from the eye trap. *Even my house feels alien since he arrived. It's not safe anymore.*

He wanted to turn the lights on to shake off the settling dread but didn't. The mere thought that it might attract Slater made him cringe and confirmed his realization that Slater's presence had rearranged his life-style and kicked him out of his comfort zone.

*I'm sneaking to my own kitchen like a fucking thief so I don't have to bump into him. I've only known him for a couple of weeks, yet I had to give up so much to accommodate him. He is too high-maintenance to keep. I can't afford this asset. It's not smart. I should get rid of him.*

Heaving a sigh, Talha shuffled up to the refrigerator and pulled the door open. The bright light stabbed him in the eye. Blinking, he searched the empty shelves until his gaze stumbled over the frying pan Slater used today, a sticky note attached to it.

'*Ağam için.*' Slater's handwriting, stretching over the note, resembled a bunch of squished bugs, as the note said, 'for Agha'.

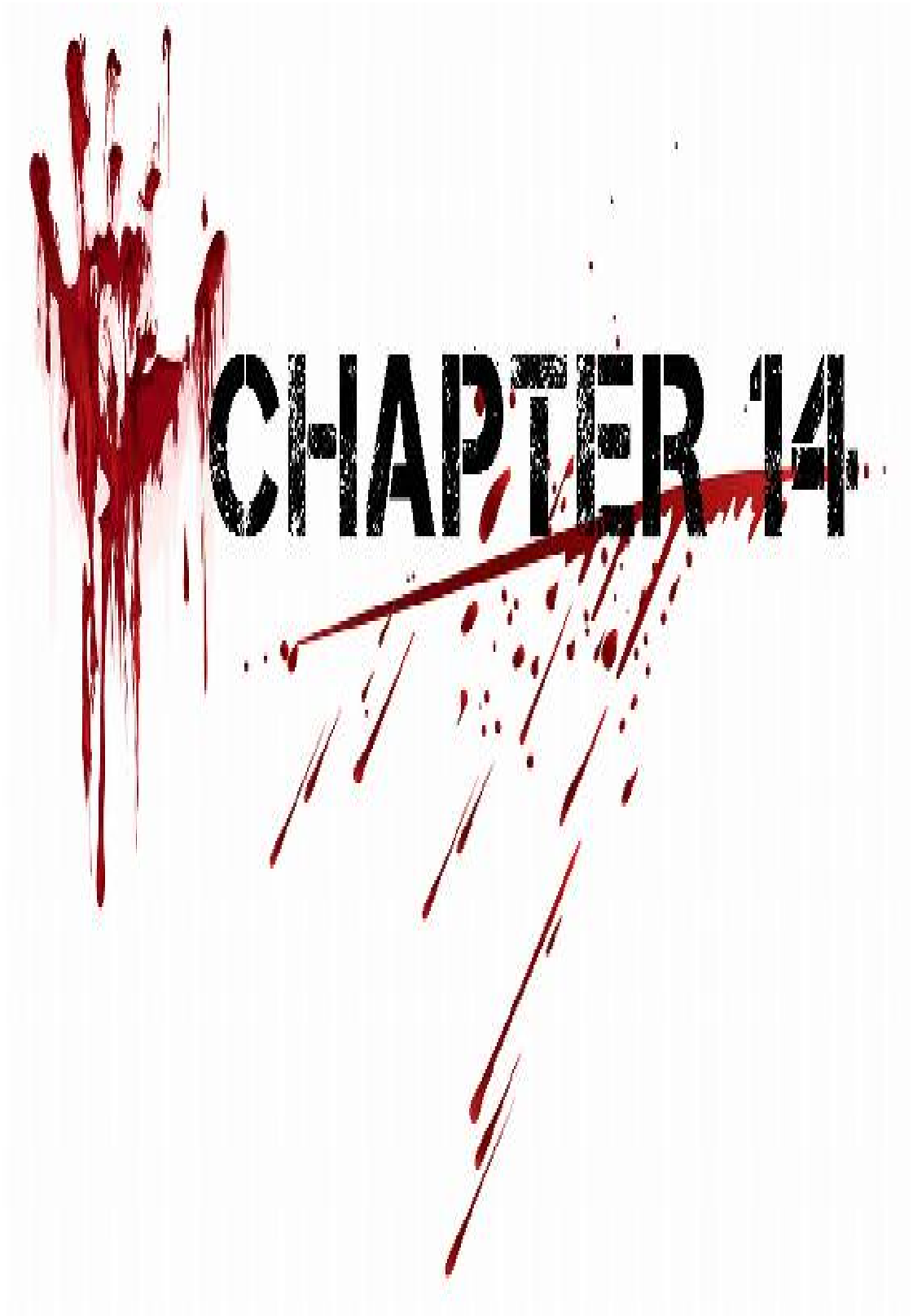
"Agha<sup>20</sup>..." Talha tasted the old-fashioned honorific title of the Ottoman Empire and couldn't help a chuckle as his mood lifted. "Who talks like this?"

*Did he really wait for me? Cook for me? He even left me a note...* Talha granted a long, suspicious look at the frying pan before pulling it out and putting it on the stove. "God, I hope I don't die from your hellish cooking..."





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**THE CAWING OF A CROW** reached Talha's ears; he stretched and rolled to his other side. Slapping the cool linens with his palm, he yawned and pried one eye open. Playful beams of the waking sun, flooding his room, repainted the pale blue silk of his linens into

silver and pink. The fresh air, carrying echoes of the night's rain, washed the room in the distinctive smell of ozone and brought the loud chirping of morning birds.

He opted to stay in bed for another twenty minutes, enjoying the cool silk wrapping around his overheated skin, but his gaze fell upon the immobile body laying on the floor. Red splatters marred everything around, and Talha's consciousness, numbed after sleeping, immediately provided a recollection of the severed head of Bekir Asani.

Talha jolted upright then blew out a strained sigh, as the familiar combat gear and messy mop of Slater's black hair settled into the picture. The red stains, he mistakenly took for blood, appeared to be the distressed colors of his red and white carpet. Slater's chest rhythmically rose and fell in deep, calm breathing; his hands rested under his cheek, legs tucked to his chest. He looked peaceful, young, and vulnerable.

*Does this count as a win or loss? Should I be happy he isn't in my bed?* Unable to find the answer, Talha grabbed a pillow and threw it at Slater. Making a few flips in the air, the pillow smacked against Slater's back, making the younger man jerk. Sitting up, Slater gawked around. His cautious eyes flickered to Talha's, then gradually switched their attention to the pillow. A wide smile stretched his lips.

"Thank you, Master." Squishing the pillow in his arms, he slumped to the carpet and wrapped his body around its fluffy softness.

"What are you doing?" Feeling tired, Talha wished he hadn't woken up.

"Sleeping."

"Why are you in my room again?"

"Master shouldn't worry. Slater won't do anything. Slater will sleep." Rubbing his cheek against the pillow in a child-like gesture, Slater closed his eyes.

"That's not what I asked."

"The house is stripped of security. In an attack, Master wouldn't be able to protect himself."

"Don't fuck with me! I can protect myself. And how can you possibly protect me, if you missed a fucking pillow?"

The corners of Slater's lips curled up, bringing a satisfied expression. "Slater didn't miss. Slater allowed Master to hit."

"Bullshit!" Talha argued.

"Slater stays with Master," Slater murmured and buried his face in the pillow.



**EVERY MORNING THE SCRIPT REPEATED ITSELF.** Talha woke up with Slater sleeping on the floor by his bed. Annoyed, he kicked him out, but with every passing day, he felt more comfortable around the ripper. He even thought that maybe he could get used to Slater's constant presence, as he got used to his bodyguards. Despite being troublesome, bratty, and needy, Slater didn't act aggressively; at least he hadn't attacked anyone yet. That thought gave Talha a small hope that he was moving in the right direction.

The rumor that Talha possessed Iblīs had spread, delivering the first results. The recalcitrant groups of Kurds that had refused to acknowledge anyone's authorities, one by one, joined the Demir Group. The ones who didn't—cleared the streets and moved to the outskirts. The territories, he'd fought for with blood and fire, fell at his feet with a single name—Iblīs. The income from the drug and weapon distribution doubled within a week and kept growing. The business organizations that sought Asani's protection now begged

for his support, and for that alone, Talha was determined to try harder and keep Slater satisfied.

Slater's behavior, changing for the better, stirred in Talha's head the first thoughts about bringing the staff back to the mansion. He was ready to give the order when one day the ripper missed dinner and came home clouded in the metallic smell of blood.

Talha knew that something had happened even before his eyes located the dark spots covering Slater's combat gear and the dried blood under his fingernails. Standing in the middle of the hall, Talha couldn't miss the ripper dropping his chin as he passed by. Sparing Talha no glance, no greeting, he aimed for the stairs. Already knowing the answer to his question, Talha asked anyway, "What have you done?"

Slater halted. His shoulders drew up as he brought his hands to his face, then clenched his fists in the air. His body twisted bending left then right as if he was fighting an urge that burned him from within.

"A mess, Master." Slater's voice came out harsh, jittery, aggressive. He didn't look back but rushed upstairs as if trying to escape Talha's company as soon as possible. "Clean it, Master, or you are useless to me."

Talha's hand, moving on its own, dug into his pants pocket and grabbed the phone. Unblocking the display, he dialed his informant. His mouth watered as word-by-word the police officer described the bloody picture of another slaughter. Seven people had been murdered in the Gazi Mahallesi neighborhood. All of them were gutted, their organs fed to a pack of stray dogs.

He vaguely remembered going upstairs and looking around. Down the corridor, behind the glass door that led to the terrace, the black figure stood by the white balustrade. With his shoulders hunched forward, Slater looked down. Without thinking, Talha stomped toward the terrace. Shoving the door open, he stepped out and into the cigarette smoke swirling around the reaper. His left palm landing on Slater's shoulder, and he clenched his right fist, ready to break Slater's nose when a row of cigarette burns ulcerating Slater's forearm captured his eyes. Some had crusted over, suggesting they were at least a few days old, the others were fresh. The white deep ones, where the burning tip had pressed into the skin over and over again looked like moon craters against his skin.

His insides twisted, fingers slacked, as he scrutinized the burning cigarette in Slater's hand. His determination weakened. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"None of your business, Master!" Sucking the air through his teeth, Slater hissed, "Fix the mess, Master, or you are useless."

Pointing a cigarette at his wrist Slater imprinted the burning tip into his skin. His chest contracting, pushing out a labored breath, but his face relaxed, softened.

"Who paid you to do this?" Tearing the cigarette out of Slater's fingers, Talha flicked it aside.

"Paid me?" Slater laughed. "No one paid me, Master. Slater did it because Slater wanted to do it."

Snatching another cigarette out of the pack, Slater squeezed it between his lips, then stroked the lighter. Sucking a few deep breaths in, he waited until the end of the cigarette smoldered, then crushed it against his forearm.

"Stop it!" Talha snapped, seizing his elbow, and Slater spun around. With one refined move of his free hand, he shook off Talha's grip.

"Slater is thirsty. Slater wants to kill. When Slater feels nothing, Slater is bored. Slater needs pain and pleasure to keep entertained. Master doesn't want to entertain, so Master has to clean the mess. Give me more contracts, Master, or Slater will find other ways to keep himself amused."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No, Master. You wanted business, here it is. I'll kill for you, but you make sure I don't have problems with the police. You clean the mess, so Slater can kill more, and you can have Iblīs. Slater is too thirsty to survive on his own. Slater needs a capable Master who will protect Slater, who will control Slater. But Talha doesn't get it. Talha wants to take but not give. Talha doesn't want to entertain Slater. If you can't do even this, then Talha isn't good for Slater." Flicking the cigarette to the floor, Slater moved for the door. "Find me more contracts, Master."

For the first time since Slater's appearance in his house, the ripper didn't try to enter Talha's room, but instead of long-awaited relief, Talha felt a knot of alertness forming in the depth of his stomach. The morning came after a restless, sleepless night; Talha fetched his phone and dialed Ejder.

“Find me a sadistic male escort. Slater is frustrated.”

“A-Abi, he is too much tro-ouble. Why don’t you put him do-own?” The way Ejder spoke through his nose and stretched the vowels suggested he was tired.

“Why should I?” Talha asked. “For the first time, I know what he wants. He brought Istanbul to Behçet. He will bring me Europe. I just have to learn how to use him. If anyone could handle Iblīs, wouldn’t it be disappointing?”

**EJDER CAME WITH THE DUSK**, bringing along a tall, tanned man with shoulder-length hair and confident black eyes.

“Go into that room and wait there,” Talha pointed to the wooden door of Slater’s bedroom on the first floor, then faced Ejder.

Humming, the man didn’t argue, but gave Talha a slow once over and then Ejder, obviously wondering whom he was supposed to please. When no one followed him, he wavered in front of the door, but still entered the room.

“Slater?” Talha called, adding a demand into his voice. “Come!”

The silence stretched for a few minutes before Slater stepped out of the kitchen. Holding a glass of milk in his hand, he crunched a

cookie.

“What?” He sounded displeased as if he’d been disturbed. Talha frowned.

“Go into your room. There is a man waiting. He is here to satisfy your needs.” Talha said; his gaze glued to Slater’s face.

The uncertain smile that touched Slater’s lips grew wider until it froze in a toothy grin, and a neurotic knot in Talha’s guts slowly released. Cocking his head, Slater halted with a cookie halfway to his mouth. “Master brought me... a whore?”

He sniggered, shaking with his whole body. Slinking up to Talha, he shoved the glass of milk and the unfinished cookie into his hands, then stole toward his room.

Talha smiled at his brother. If the male escort could keep Slater in a good mood, Talha wouldn’t mind paying him full time.

“Wanna help me with dinner? If Slater is happy, I think you can return home.”



**A DOOR SLAMMING** into its frame shattered the silence. Putting a knife aside, Talha glanced at Ejder. Receiving a slight shrug at his silent question, he skulked out of the kitchen.



Standing in the middle of the hall, Slater shook the blood of his karambit, then wiped it against his pants before sheathing it behind his back. Noticing Talha, he grinned. “Thank you, Master, your gift was delicious.”

Smudges of blood covered his face as if someone had been trying to push him away with bloody hands. Dark spots marred his messy clothes, and a trail of bloody footprints stretched through the hall from the door of his bedroom to where he stood.

“What the fuck have you done?” Talha’s heart sunk. He stormed toward the bedroom and inched the door open. Red splashes of blood decorated the blue Persian carpets, walls, and the golden bedspread. Mutilated and disfigured, the body lay on the floor with his arms spread and guts out. Unable to tolerate the view and the sickening stench of blood and bile, Talha shut the door.

Slater didn’t reply, as all his attention was directed to the aisle that led to the kitchen. Standing in the doorway, Ejder pointed a gun at Slater’s head.

“Huh?” Slater chuckled; his palm curled up, and a black throwing needle slipped between his fingers. “A little boy hiding behind a gun. Come, you will die first.”

Tongue stuck to his pallet, Talha rushed to him and grabbed Slater’s hand the same moment Ejder pulled the trigger. Slater shifted and the bullet, catching the strands of his hair smashed against a marble wall.

Disregarding the black muzzle pointed at his back, Slater spun around and faced Talha. A needle, squeezed in his fist, swished through the air as Slater thrust his hand forward, using it like a knife. In the last moment, Talha reared back. The edge of the needle passed an inch away from his throat.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” Slater’s voice lowered to a dangerous whisper as he bared his teeth. “Talha is stupid! Talha is useless! No one has ever insulted Slater like this. The deal is off.”

“Ejder, leave!” Talha ordered. Grabbing Slater’s hand, he yanked it to himself. Installing eye contact, he captured Slater’s attention.

“But Abi...”

“Leave! NOW!” Talha snapped. Wavering, Ejder moved out of his sight, and in a heartbeat, the door clicked closed. At that moment, Talha prayed that Ejder would listen to him and go to his

girlfriend. Unable to predict the outcome of the situation, he needed Ejder to be as far away from Slater as possible.

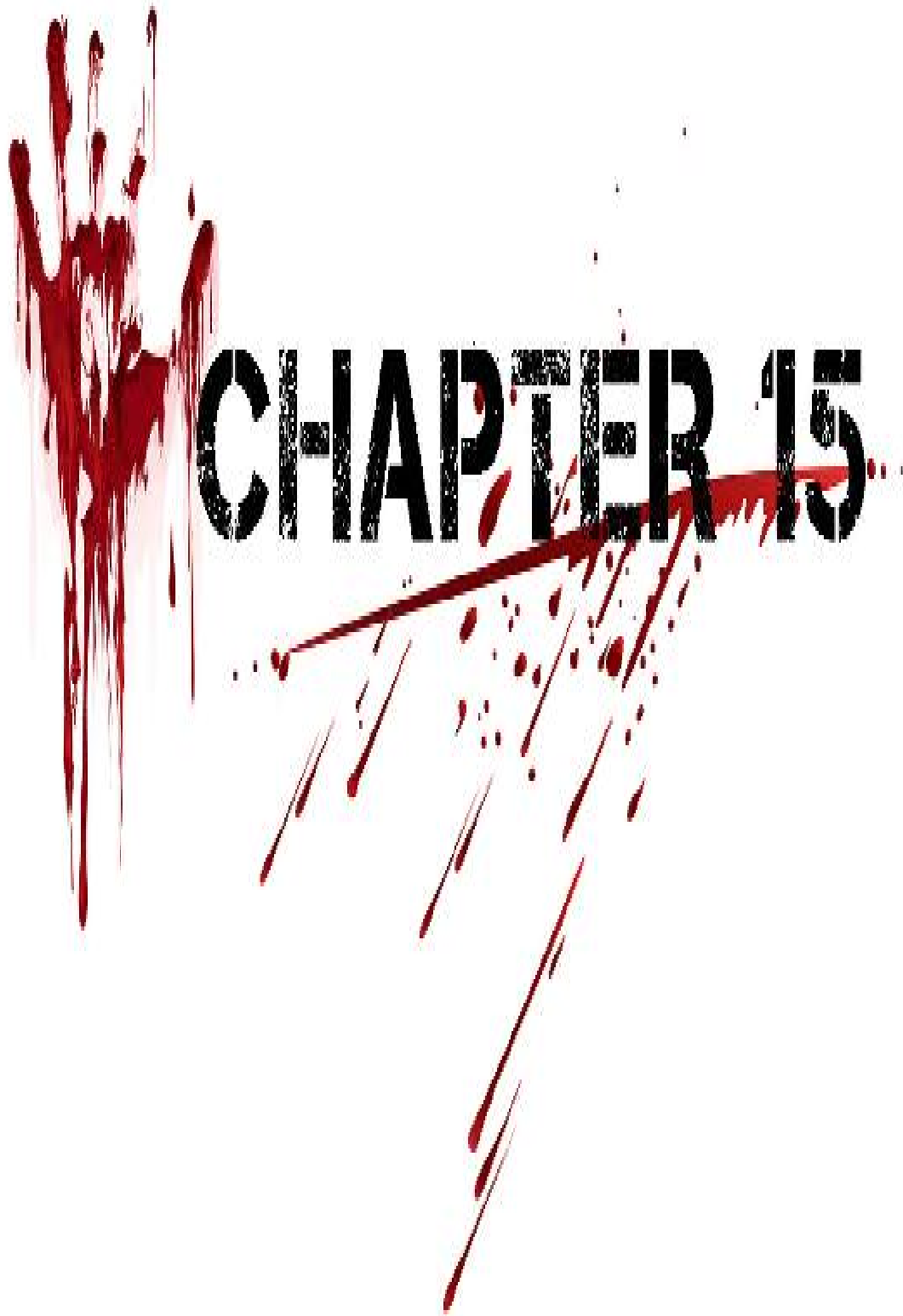
One on one with Slater, Talha felt the gravity of responsibility lifting from his chest. Boring into the large pupils of the ripper, he said, “No, the deal’s not off. I have been patient with you. I have wasted my time on you. I have tolerated your shit all these days trying to understand what the fuck you want! I have the blood of so many people on my name because of you! You want pain? I’m in a generous mood.”

Clenching his fist, he sent the first jab to Slater’s face, but the younger man, slightly inclining his torso back, let the punch cut the air.

“It’s too late for that, Talha.”



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**“IT’S TOO LATE FOR THAT, TALHA,”** Slater whispered, but a slight doubt flicked in the depth of his dilated pupils.

*Then I have nothing to lose.* Taking his chances, Talha threw a backhand, this time hitting the mark. Neck strained, Slater's head bounced to the side, but his glare remained glued to Talha.

"You raised a hand to my brother." Clenching his fist, Talha sent a punch at Slater's mouth. His bottom lip burst open, and blood seeped down his chin. "You murdered in my house."

In one swift motion, Talha hurled his upper body forward sending a crashing punch into Slater's right floating rib. Adrenaline shook his fingers as he lost the corners of his vision to darkness. He didn't care if he harmed Slater anymore.

Slater shuddered, hands drew toward his middle, shoulders hunched forward, but Talha didn't care. Blind rage, pulsing behind his eyes, filled his ears with the loud drumming of his heart that stuttered *kill-kill-kill-kill*. He lurched at the younger man with a series of short, fast jabs to his torso. The red fog condensed, filling his vision; he grabbed the ripper's shoulder and granted him with a knee strike to his stomach. He vaguely registered Slater shuddering and dropping to his knees, hands pressing to the left side of his torso, right above the hip.

Talha bent forward. Fingers wrapping around Slater's biceps, he yanked him upright. Not waiting for the ripper to find his feet, he stomped toward the staircase. Slater's legs barely moved as he fought with the steep steps, trying not to lose his balance, but Talha didn't slow down. The all-consuming flames of anger feasted on his soul. He wasn't sure who he was mad at. Was it Slater who never listened to him, who brought the severed head of his enemy to his house, who killed in his home, who slept in his bed? Or maybe he was mad at himself for bringing a psychopathic murderer into his house. For being arrogant enough and believing that he could conquer the world and control the devil? Only today, when Slater drew out a throwing needle to send it at Ejder's eye, did the gravity of his actions crash onto his shoulders.

For everything Slater had done, Talha was responsible. If Slater killed Ejder, it would be his hands covered with the blood of his own brother, not Slater's. Cornered with his actions, he'd locked himself in a cage of desperation, allowing Slater to gain influence over his life. But he was done being kind. He was done being understanding. He'd given Slater more chances than he should have. It didn't matter what value Iblīs had. No money in the world, no power, was worth losing his brother.

Entering his bedroom, he dragged Slater to the middle of the room and dumped him on the red and white carpet. He didn't see a human being anymore, but a beast he had no sympathy for. All he had for Slater was rage.

The mocking, questioning gaze, the bloody lopsided smile, the tilt of his head, even his fingers, curled in a defenseless way, everything screamed of farce. Slater didn't treat him seriously. Allowing himself to be hit, he only proved his strength, but even knowing this, Talha couldn't stop.

*I'm an idiot... He has never been a victim. I should have figured it out sooner. Slater only does what he wants. All those scars, all those burns cover his skin because he wanted them. Not for a single day in his life was he used. But he used others alright. He probably only stayed with Behçet because the man kept the police away from him. For someone like Slater, spending the rest of his life in jail would be hell on earth.*

Hit after hit, he crashed his fists down, sending occasional kicks in the same direction. His heartbeat echoed in his throbbing knuckles as the room soaked in red. His fists crusted over with blood; he halted. His vision cleared, bringing his focus to his right shoe; it was covered in a glistening mess of saliva and blood. The same mess covered Slater's mouth.

He didn't know where the words came from, but his voice didn't sound familiar even to his own ears. "You wanted me to fuck you?"

His knees collided with the bouncy surface of the Persian carpet as his eyes linked with Slater's dilated pupils. The ripper licked his lips, taking a shaky breath. Talha glanced down. Slater's combat pants bulged, his chest rose and fell in labored breathing, and shimmering droplets of sweat coated his neck.

Talha's body burned; his head swam. The drumming in his head resounded in his groin. He yanked Slater's shirt open, revealing a torso covered with red bruises, then he unfastened Slater's combat pants. Slater didn't fight him even when he rolled the younger man to his stomach and wrestled his pants down.

If Slater had spoken or fought back, Talha might have sobered up and stopped, but Slater fisted the carpet pile, gazing over his shoulder. His transparent eyes, heavy with lust, burned the last layers of humanity out of Talha's soul. He unzipped his pants and

took his cock out. Spreading Slater's butt cheeks, he forced himself through the tight ring of his sphincter.

The mix of pain and pleasure washed everything in bright red as Slater's inner muscles clenched around his cock. Hissing, Slater pushed air through gritted teeth, and the lethal grip loosened, relaxed, and wrapped around Talha's cock with incredible warmth.

"Master?" A half-plea half-moan broke from Slater's mouth, and he cast another glance over his shoulder. A deep shade of red blossomed over his cheekbones, spreading to his ears, as his bloody teeth glinted from behind swollen lips.

A heavy, hot wave stormed into Talha's head, erasing everything around. Grinding his teeth, Talha rocked his hips against Slater's butt cheeks, then pulled out only to slam again into the gaping, willing flesh. His body, moving on its own, increased speed, and the last anchors of reality crushed under the avalanche of euphoria. His gaze, never leaving the side of the reaper's face, watched his watering eyes roll up. Slater's mouth slackened with ragged breathing and he lost the ability to swallow, as bloody saliva pooled on the carpet, absorbing into the pile.

Driven by the weird need, Talha seized Slater's wrist, digging his fingers into the delicate skin on the inner side. Veins, tight as wires, drummed against his fingertips in a crazy rhythm, as the smaller body shook under his weight. Slater's back arched, his ass went up as he begged, "Harder... More, Master... No need to be gentle. Slater won't break."

Blinking through the streaming sweat, Talha watched Slater's spine tense. The soft tightness of Slater's inner muscles messed with his mind. He clutched the younger man's hip with his other hand, increasing the rhythm. The sweet pressure, building in his balls, spread up his chest with a heavy flood of boiling blood; hitting his head, it shattered his vision. Falling forward, Talha opened his mouth and sank his teeth into the naked shoulder in front of him. The skin broke under his teeth, flooding his mouth with a tangy, metallic taste. Slater groaned, and small tremors seized his body vibrating against Talha's chest.

"Master..?"

Squeezing Slater's wrist, Talha let go. Vicious jolts of electricity blasted through him seizing every muscle in painful pleasure. Releasing Slater's shoulder from the clench of his teeth, he

rested his forehead between his shoulder blades, wiping the sweat against the remains of the torn black shirt.

Impenetrable darkness swallowed everything around. Stretching time and reality, it muffled all sounds, except the chaotic drumming of his blood. For a second, Talha thought he would collapse. His lungs burned, bright sparks flickered in the darkness of his failed vision, erasing his ability to breathe. Tearing the air with his teeth, he emptied himself into Slater's body.

The last jolts of pleasure dissolved into the silence, and Talha withdrew. Not a single thought inhabited his mind, chased away by his maddened pulse. When his throbbing vision focused, the reality of his actions crashed down. Slater's knuckles blanched white as he clasped the carpet pile. His hips trembled, the puddles of cum marred the Persian carpet, Talha's cum drenched down Slater's balls, as the bruised, bloody face grinned up at him.

"Slater was wrong. Master is fine. Master will do."

Bitter taste filled Talha's mouth. His eyes burned, skin crawled. He zipped himself up, and slowly, fighting through the dense air, entered the shisha lounge.

His nerves tight, but not even once did he look back to check if Slater was okay. Guilt, regret, and revulsion mixed into the deadliest poison that now corroded his blood.

With shaky hands, he put on a coal stove and added in a couple of coal cubes. Setting up a hookah, he stuffed the bowl with a mix of tobacco and cannabis, added water from a carafe into the water jar, before combining it all. He waited and waited, refusing to look back at the result of his actions. The moiré coal streaked with red and silver, trapping his gaze and emptying his head. He wished time would stop so he wouldn't need to think about what he had done.

A steady, red glow settled in the coals. Talha picked up tweezers, picked the first cube and placed it on top of the bowl, then added two more. Grabbing the hose, he squeezed the mouthpiece with his lips and sucked. It took him around ten inhales to reach the thick, acrid smoke. He held it in his lungs as long as he could, wanting the emotional numbness to come sooner. Sinking onto the carpets covering the floor of the shisha lounge, he propped his elbows against his knees and rested his head over his clasped hands. For a moment, everything stopped mattering.



*I fucked him... Or was it rape? I wasn't even drunk, yet I did it. I wanted to hurt him so bad that I got turned on. How sick is that?*

He wasn't sure how much time passed before a soft rustle touched his ears. Talha lifted his chin. On all fours, Slater waited in front of him watching his every move. His left eye swollen closed; his puffy lips resembled a messy open wound oozing with blood. Slater would have looked pathetic, but the glowing flames in his right eye and his predatory, bloody smile brought to his features a demonic look.

"I can smell your hatred in the air. Hate fucks are the best, aren't they? Master was so good, so passionate." Slater's hand stepped forward. "Did Master feel good?"

"Stay where you are," Talha warned, rubbing his temples with his fingers, thick veins pulsing under his tips.

*I should kill him.* His gaze shot up and fixed on the top drawer of his nightstand where he kept his gun; too far to get there fast.

"Huh? Master is looking for a gun..." Slater didn't ask but stated, and Talha dragged his attention upon the ripper.

Slater's forehead wrinkled as a serious expression crawled up his face. The demonic look of his right eye shot through Talha's defense. The black hole of Slater's dilated pupil sucked out his soul, and Talha realized—there was no point in lying. Slater already knew everything.

"What, did I say it out loud?"

"Master is funny. So honest." Slater's head snapped to the side as a wide grin settled over his face. "Slater made a decision. The trial period is over, Master."

Slater's hand followed the zigzag of his right leg and drew out the black throwing knife from the top of his boot. Talha's vision focused on the light-absorbing, matte surface, then jumped to the twist of Slater's raw lips.

*Is this how I'm gonna die?* Talha couldn't tell if it was cannabis that shushed his fear, or if he was too exhausted to care, but his heart didn't halt when the blade reached his chest and stopped at the notch of his throat.

Slapping Slater's hand away with a careless gesture, Talha said, "If you intend to use it—do it, but don't make empty threats or

I'll think you are pathetic.”

Slater's single-visible eye blazed with curiosity. “What do I do? I really like Master, but Master wants to kill Slater. That won't do...”

The smile dimmed, and his canine tooth sank into his puffy bottom lip.

“Here you go, Master. Let's settle it.” Flipping the knife in his palm, Slater offered it to Talha haft forward. Talha didn't take it, and Slater's scorching fingers clasped around his hand, shoving the warm metal into his palm. Curling Talha's fingers in a fist, Slater guided the knife up to his own throat. “Do it...”

The edge of the knife scratched Slater's throat, as the reaper drew it up and outlined his chin, a red trail stretching behind. His lips parted, and his pink tongue, slipping out, flicked over the blade as it leveled with his lips. Body heat rising, Talha watched Slater's tongue curl around the edge. Killing Slater now would be so easy. He just had to sink the knife into the willing mouth, and Slater would choke on blood. All his problems would be solved. There would be no murders in his house. No one would watch him sleep, get into his bed, or threaten Ejder. No one would get Iblīs either. His life would return to normal. Then why was he wavering? Slater couldn't be controlled, couldn't be reasoned with. He was a ticking time bomb with a broken timer, but even knowing it, Talha couldn't drive the knife in Slater's mouth. He wasn't sure what drained his anger but scanning the transparent eye, that glowed with determination and hope, he felt no hatred only crushing weariness.

*I don't get him... He tried to kill me not long ago, now he offers me his life. He's unstable and should be put down, then why can't I kill him? That would solve my problem. That would solve Ejder's problem. Maybe it would even solve Slater's problem, but how can I kill him when he does something like this?*

Never dropping his focus from Talha, Slater licked the edge of the knife, and blood mixed with saliva. Talha cringed.

“What the fuck are you doing? Stop!” He tried to release his fingers, but Slater's hands clasped around his palm, guiding the blade deeper into his tongue.

Without thinking, Talha thrust his other thumb into Slater's mouth, sliding it under the blade, over the tongue, and hissed as the knife bit into his knuckle.

The smile evaporated from Slater's face, giving way to a weird, unreadable expression. His fingers released Talha's armed hand, then clasped over the other, and rapacious lips closed around the thumb. The lacerated tongue lapped over Talha's skin, mixing their blood. A heavy pink touched Slater's cheeks, dropping the eyelid of his healthy eye closed, as he craned his neck lavishing Talha's digit with his eager mouth.

"Huh? Isn't that funny? Now we are blood-bound, Master."

It took Talha a moment to come around before he snatched his hand away. "This is gross..."

Slater licked his lips, then grinned. "Slater made up his mind. Slater stays."

"No," Talha said as hard as he could. "Slater doesn't. You leave, or one of us dies."

"Master could have killed Slater, but Master didn't. Master is kind. Slater realized that to have a perfect master, Slater has to mold him. All the others were failures because they were established, but Master is young. Master is good material. Master can be what Slater needs."

*Mold me? Does he think I can be manipulated and controlled?*

"No," Talha repeated. He put the hose aside and propped his palm against the carpet, ready to get up, but a scorching hand landed over his knee.

"There is no escape from the deal. Slater stays. Slater belongs to Master. Master shouldn't worry, Slater won't harm anyone who Master holds dear."

With cat-like grace, Slater lowered his chest, pressing it to the carpet, his pelvis rocking as his pink tongue lapped over Talha's shoe, smearing blood all over the surface.

"That's disgusting. Stop it." Contempt quirked Talha's upper lip.

"Slater will be good. Slater will bring Europe to Master. If Master wishes, Slater will burn the whole world to the ground. Slater will do everything for Master as long as Master keeps Slater entertained," Slater hissed and pushed his upper body up and forward, so his chest touched Talha's knee; the left side of his face contorted with a grimace of hurt.

*Everything?* Talha tried to shake the ripper's words off, but the gambling ambition, the same one that drove him from Mardin to Istanbul, inflamed his chest. *But what price do I have to pay for it?*

Tilting his head to the side, Talha picked up the hose and extended his hand, offering Slater the mouthpiece of the hookah. "Pull. It will ease the pain."

A flicker of a victory smile lit Slater's face for a split second, before he obediently opened his mouth, squeezed the metal part between his bloody lips, then sucked.



**HALF-EXPECTING EJDER TO RETURN**, Talha left Slater in his room, and moved down the corridor, searching his pockets for his cell phone. Before his foot landed on the marble staircase, the front door flew open, and a group of men, searching the hall with gun muzzles, entered his mansion. Holding a gun with both hands, Ejder shot a glance around, before his eyes focused on Talha.

Heaving a sigh, Talha descended, then waved his hand in the air, demanding attention. "You're all dismissed. Call for the cleaning crew."

"Is he dead?" The hard line of Ejder's mouth quirked in an arrogant smile.

“No, he isn’t. And you are going back to Mardin,” Talha said, passing by his disheveled brother and the group of armed men. Turning to enter the kitchen, he raised his voice. “Wasn’t I clear? Dismiss.”

“What the fuck, Abi?”

Grabbing a clean glass from the counter, Talha poured some water, then drained it in one go.

“You are returning to Mardin,” he repeated even before he took the glass away from his mouth; his breath misted the transparent walls.

“No, I’m not. I’m staying here, with you.” Snatching the glass from Talha’s hand, Ejder slammed it against the counter. “What the fuck is going on? Why didn’t you kill him?”

“Listen to me...” Stealing a glance at the door, Talha lowered his voice. “I don’t have any intention of killing him.”

“What? He almost killed us!”

“After you drew a gun! And now you brought people here. What did you tell them? That I can’t control my new asset? Do they know he is Iblīs?” Silence hung, so Talha added, “That’s why you are leaving. I can’t run the business and worry about you two murdering each other. You threatened Iblīs. I haven’t heard anyone ever surviving that. You shot at him. I hope he is sleeping now because if he isn’t, there is about to be a blood bath. What were you thinking?”

“Then fucking kill him!” Ejder’s nostrils flared as his short, agitated breathing broke out of his chest in heavy puffs. “You don’t need him. We managed without him just fine.”

“No. I won’t put a horse down because it threw me off once. I want to explore his potential. I’m willing to take my chances with him, and for that you have to leave. It’s final. Next time you pull out a gun, I might not be able to stop him.”

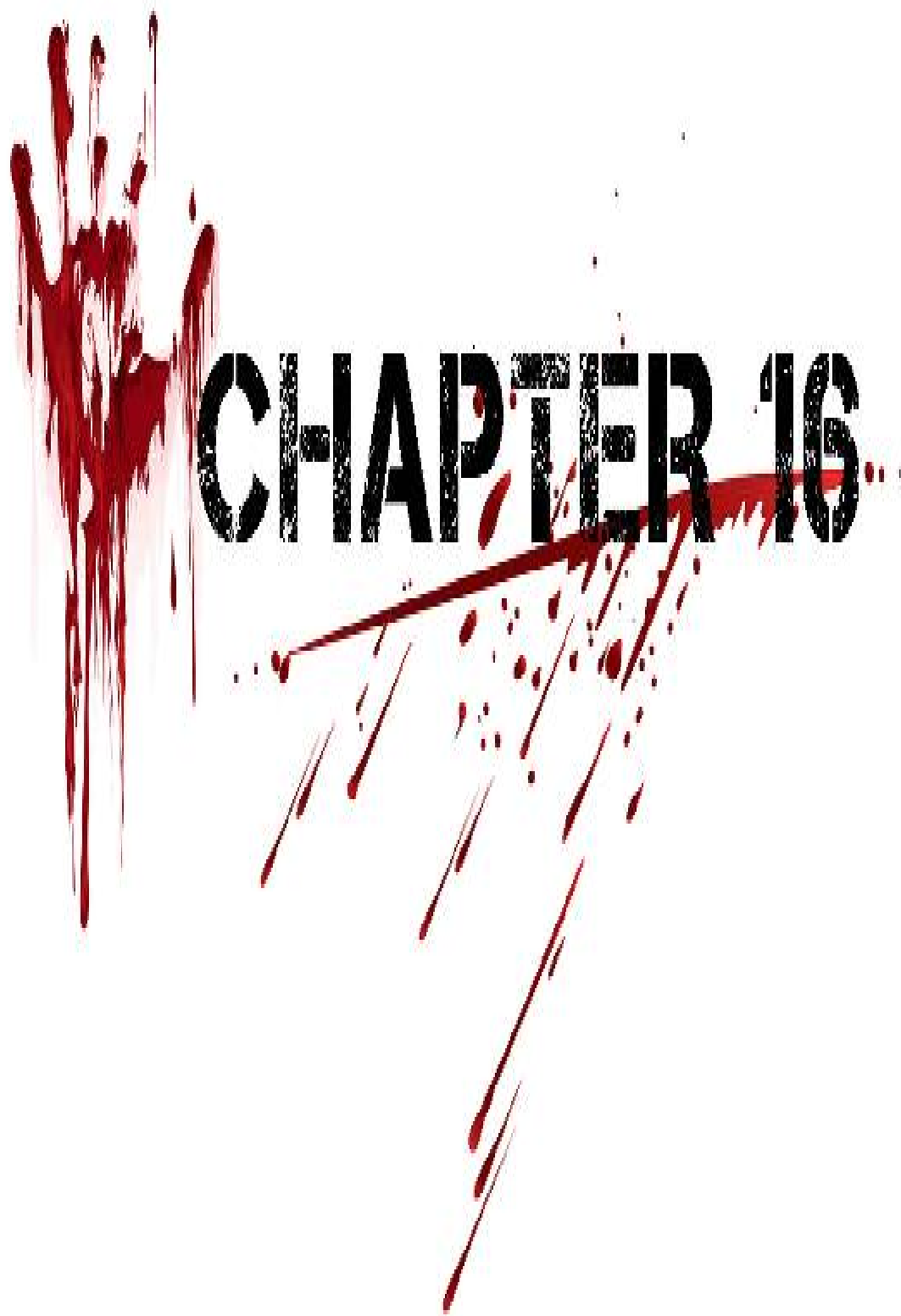
A small muscle under Ejder’s eye twitched, betraying his unbalanced inner state. He licked his chapped lips, bared his teeth in a quick snarl, before dropping his chin. “What if he kills you?”

“Then you will be the next head of the Demir family. How cool would that be?”

“Not funny!” Ejder said, and Talha smiled. His hand landed on his brother’s shoulder and squeezed it.

“I’ll be fine. I need you in Mardin anyway. You leave tonight.”





**EJDER GRANTED HIM** a last pleading look in an attempt to make his brother reconsider. Implacable, Talha moved to the stairs. The door clicked closed behind his back, shutting off all foreign sounds. Quiet again, his house felt too big, yet too crowded with the

two of them in it. Slater's mere presence depressed him, and Talha needed a few hours of solitude to straighten his thoughts. He also needed to reorganize his group's structure and delegate Ejder's tasks to his lieutenants, but he wasn't in the mood for that. His knuckles still burned from hitting Slater, and the drop of adrenaline in his blood made him feel sluggish, drowsy.

For a moment, he considered taking a nap but that would mean returning to the bedroom where the reaper slept on the bloody carpet. The thought brought back the haunting feeling of alienation, and the overpowering stench of chlorine only aggravated it. Though the body had been removed, and the cleaning crew scrubbed his house spotless, Talha couldn't shake off the deep-bone aversion the events instilled in him. Nothing felt clean anymore, and he itched to take a shower. Slater's blood on his knuckles burned like acid, yet he kept standing in the hall, unmoving.

The battering ram of memories charged into him, providing visuals of Slater's bloody mouth, scarred back, round ass, and the heated look of the lewd eyes that stared at him, through him.

"Fuck my life!" Shame punched him in the face. He winced, spun on his heel, and rushed down the corridor toward the library, trying to escape guilt, shame, and memories.





**THE BLACK SILHOUETTES OF TALL** bookcases towered above him in the gloom. Weak light filtered through a tall mashrabiya window, casting ornaments to the walnut floor. A long desk stood closer to the opposite wall, with a marble globe on top of it.

*Right... The library...* The memory of his escape surfaced. A heavy book still lay on his stomach as he sprawled on a long leather sofa. He peered through the darkness, unable to remember switching the lights off. His back ached from the uncomfortable position, and his arm numbed from using it as a pillow. Sitting up, he cracked his neck, restarting the blood circulation and put his feet down.

“What the fuck?” He blurted as his foot stepped on something warm and soft. Frowning, he watched the dark shadow at his feet move. A shaggy head lifted, and a sleepy smile stretched the reaper’s lips.

“Morning, Master.”

“URGH!” Weariness crashed into Talha’s core as he sank his fingers into his hair and slumped onto the soft leather. “What are you doing here?”

“Master didn’t come to bed, so Slater came looking. Master should sleep. Slater will guard. Don’t worry, Master. Slater is calm now. Slater will be good.”

*This must be a nightmare...* Filling his lungs with air, Talha got up and stepped over the reaper as his feet carried him to the door.

“Master?” Slater’s voice picked up alert notes, and Talha glanced back. A single-visible eye glinting in the dark, Slater’s palm hit the sofa, his elbow quivered, as the reaper forced himself upright. “Where are you going?”

Slater swayed on his feet, palming the right side of his belly where the bullet had hit him. Talha didn’t care.

“Out. Don’t follow me.” Pushing the library door open, he strode toward the hall.

“Out where?”

“None of your business.” Approaching the main entrance, Talha reached out to grab the door handle, when vicious fingers seized his elbow, causing him to turn one hundred and eighty.

Their glares met. Despite the dark and swollen areas covering Slater’s face, Talha saw how pallid his skin was. “A

woman again? Why? Wasn't Slater good?"

"Were you good?" Talha almost laughed. It took him a moment to find his words and another one to form them into sentences. "Are you for real? You're overwhelming and annoying. You murdered in my fucking house. You tell me. Were you good?" Talha reiterated as calm as he could.

"Slater thought Master is over it. Master didn't kill Slater. It means Master accepted Slater."

"The deal stands, but don't push me. I'm tired of you and your quirks. Prove yourself useless, and I'll get rid of you like a mad dog. Now, if your needs are satisfied, we have no business left to do today. Don't follow me, and don't kill anyone. If you do, our deal is off. For good."

"No, Master can't," Slater's cheek quivered, and Talha shook the reaper's hand off himself.

"Who is forbidding me, Slater? You?" No reply. Talha added, "I can do whatever I want. Remember this well, and don't leave the house. If you are hungry—order delivery. The money is in the safe in my bedroom. There is no lock you can't open, right? Get yourself busy."

Slater's jaw clenched, and Talha strolled to his car.

"When will you be back, Master?" The question disturbed the warm, quiet night. Talha ignored, so Slater yelled, "Don't run from me, Master! Get used to me!"



**THOUGH TALHA RETURNED HOME** the next evening, Slater didn't show up for three more days. Without the reaper, his life fell into accustomed grooves, and for the first time in weeks, Talha called a meeting at home.

Folding his hands behind his head, Talha leaned back into the tall throne-like chair that stood in the head of the wooden Π-shaped table. Twelve people dressed in refined suits took their places. Bright sun, breaking through the transparent curtains, played with the silverish marble floor, adding to the morning serenity.

With everyone seated, Talha leaned forward, clasped his fingers on the tabletop, and looked each man in the eye.

"I called you in because I have some announcements to make." The massive double door of the Grand Hall opened, and Slater slipped in. His icy eyes focused on Talha as he folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the marble wall. Talha squinted, examining his pale features, tense stance, and yellowish, healing bruises. A few men shot curious looks at Slater before returning their attention to Talha.

Dinçer stiffened, and his chiseled face morphed into an impenetrable mask. His first thought about chasing the reaper away disappeared, as Talha realized that he'd never seen Slater around

people. It was a good opportunity to learn his behavior and understand how close Talha could keep him. Deciding to wait and watch, Talha continued. “You probably already know that Ejder left Istanbul. What you don’t know is that he will be taking over Southeast Anatolia.”

A murmur ran through the room, and Talha raised his hand demanding silence.

“Talha, with all due respect, that’s my region,” The massive frame of Güvenç, the current leader of Southeast Anatolia, stood up, his face red. Hotheaded and short-tempered, he had been a great executer but proved a poor leader. Talha had considered transferring him for a long time. Now the opportunity had been provided for him.

“Was your region,” Talha corrected. “You are coming to Istanbul to take over Ejder’s duties.”

“Talha...”

“I’m afraid, this is not negotiable,” Talha added in a firm voice. “I have a specific task for you that no one else could complete with perfection. You are a military man. Leaving you in Mardin would be a waste of your talent. Your destiny isn’t drugs, it’s weapons, and you know it. You are bored in Mardin. You are not the lap dog your wife wants you to be. Form an army for me. A mercenary army with the best people. Train them. Make sure no one can best them. Can you do this?”

Güvenç wavered, messing his reddish bush of hair with thick, pink fingers. Talha knew exactly what the man was thinking. The drug business promised far more than a mercenary army could ever bring. Before the man was able to refuse, Talha added, “Of course, you will get Ejder’s share, plus thirty percent of the income the army provides. This isn’t really a choice, Güvenç. I need Ejder in Mardin, and I need someone here. I would prefer it to be you, but you can try to make a deal with Ejder to stay as second-in-command in Mardin. What will it be?”

Under the drilling attention of eleven men, Güvenç backed down. His face, now a lighter shade of pink, relaxed as he slumped back into his seat. It wasn’t a bad offer. Everyone knew it. Even if Ejder’s share was smaller than the current one Güvenç had, the Marmara region was more profitable, and with its ports and open water, held greater potential.

Catching the interested gazes from those who counted profit faster, Talha pressed, “What will it be, Güvenç?”

“At your command, Reis.” The man bowed his head.

“Great.” Talha smiled with his lips only. “Before we start with the updates, does anyone have questions?”

“What about Iblīs?” Salik, the current leader of Sakarya Province, slurred. His thin upper lip curled up, hiding below his massive, beak-like nose, displayed pink gum with black holes where his front teeth had once been. “Is it true that you got him?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Talha saw Slater’s head snap to the side. His electric gaze burned through him, yet Talha refused to grant him his whole attention.

“We are negotiating,” Talha ducked the question, and a blinding smile split Slater’s face. Watching it morph into the arrogant grin, Talha clarified, “But I have yet to see his usefulness.”

“When will we get to meet that sick fuck?” Salik pressed.

“You won’t,” Talha deadpanned. “If things work out, Iblīs will remain my personal asset, and I don’t see any reason to disclose his identity.”

Separating from the wall, Slater silently moved around the table giving each man a long, piercing stare. Dinçer’s neck strained. His dark eyes peering up at the reaper as his colorless lips hardened. Talha knew he was ready to pull his gun and shoot Slater.

Slater’s eyes heated with recognition as his gaze lingered over Dinçer.

“I know you,” the liquid voice stated, electrifying the atmosphere as their glares clashed.

At any other time, Talha would have let the situation escalate to see how far they would take it, but too many curious gazes were chained to Slater already.

Talha got up, tugging the blanket of attention back to himself. “Don’t interrupt. If you want to stay—be quiet.”

“Who is this?” Salik touched his nose with his index finger, keeping a suspicious eye on Slater.

“No one. Please ignore him.”

“No one, yet he is here, in a closed meeting, where he can see our faces.” Salik snorted and passed a knowing look to everyone

around him. “He could testify.”

Talha almost rolled his eyes, but he understood the concern.

“Slater is my consultant, my protégé. He grew up in England and will be helping me develop a new channel. Now, once your curiosity is satisfied, let’s get to the point.”

The corners of Slater’s mouth stretched in a thin smile as he passed Dinçer. His fingers ran over the back of his chair and Talha could swear he did it with a single purpose—to make Dinçer nervous. Moving from one chair to another, the reaper examined every man present.

Before anyone asked more unnecessary questions that might provoke Slater to answer, Talha said, “Dinçer, why don’t you start?”

“Yes, Reis.” Dinçer’s shoulders relaxed a fraction. He got up and ran his palms down his black suit to straighten invisible creases. Talha sat down. “For the last three weeks, five organizations stepped under the Demir Group. Since the Kırım group joined us, we dominate the Marmara region. Our current control over the drug market in Marmara and Southeast Anatolia is over eighty percent, which allowed us to fix the prices of heroin and marijuana.”

“You have a week to increase it to ninety. Send an envoy to those who don’t cooperate. Tell them it’s the last warning and their only chance. The next message will be delivered by Iblīs.”

“Yes, Reis.”

“I want the Aegean and Mediterranean regions to be mine within four months. The Black Sea, Eastern, and Central Anatolia regions by spring. Make sure they understand their choices. They can prosper with me or rot. If I don’t have control over my own country, how can I gain control over Europe?”

“Yes, Reis.”

“What else?”

“The Asani cartel is still choking in blood. I think we should...”

Talha stopped listening as Slater, completing a half-circle around the table, stopped behind his back. Propping his elbow on the backrest of Talha’s chair, he rested his chin on his palm. He whispered, his breath touching Talha’s neck. “You have a rat in your nest, Master.”

*What?*

Slater unbent. Passing behind the tall chair, he scrutinized people sitting on the other side of the table. Someone spoke, but Talha didn't listen. Looping Slater's words in his head, he missed the reports from three lieutenants before Slater finished the whole circle.

*Who? How does he know?* Talha's attention bounced from one face to another, as his mind scrolled through the backgrounds of every man present in the room. Some of these people he'd known for years. Many times, he'd trusted them with his life, yet it could be anyone.

Twelve people. Nineteen provinces. Two regions. One common goal which could easily become a stumbling block—money and power. How many of those who he called comrades would want to eliminate him to create a power vacuum? How many of them would want to fight for the right to stand at the top of the hill?

*Any of them...* Talha had to admit, but another thought inhabited his head. *What if Slater is messing around? What if he is lying to breed strife? Why should I trust him when all he does is mess around?*

"Talha?" Dinçer called, demanding his attention.

*Maybe this is what Slater wants? To isolate me. To instill paranoia in my mind. To make me doubt my lieutenants.* Talha observed Dinçer's serious face. His black hair, short at the temples and longer on top, looked like he spent at least half an hour messing with it. Shaking his head, Talha refused to think it could be him.

"No?" Dinçer's brows rose.

"No, what?" Talha said, dumbfounded, catching more curious eyes on himself.

Dinçer mouthed, "What the fuck?" but repeated himself, "We are talking about approaching the Kaya Cartel from the Mediterranean region and offering them the deal first. They are huge. If we swallow them, the rest will fall to our feet."

"Great. Do it." Getting angry at himself for allowing Slater to ruin his concentration and get into his head, Talha rubbed his forehead.

"Then, are we done?" Dinçer repeated. "Do you have anything else on your agenda?"

“No...” Talha tried to get back into business mode but couldn't. Slater's words unsettled his mind throwing it into the loop. Tonight, ten people would leave Istanbul. The rat might be among them. Getting up, Talha said, “Actually, I have. Tonight, I'm having a small party here, so I expect you all to honor me with your presence for a quiet dinner. You are more than welcome to bring a plus one if you please, but keep in mind that escort girls will be the light and color of the night.”

“Girls, nice!” Someone exclaimed as the laughter rolled in the room. Talha sensed a few hard, unhappy glares yet no one dared to decline his offer.

“Dismissed.” He finished and strode out of the Grand Hall. Passing Slater, he whispered, “Follow me.”

Striding down the carpet road, Talha approached his bedroom, pulled the door open, and gestured for Slater to enter. The door slammed behind him as he stepped into the dim room. The smell of bitter almond and nutmeg enveloped him, calming him down.

Strolling across the room, Slater slumped onto the messy bed, his eyes shimmering with curiosity and something else, something similar to mockery.

“Speak,” Talha ordered.

“Oh, Slater will, but the information isn't free, Master.” Slater stretched the words, his smile building.

Hands balling into fists, Talha blew the air out of his mouth. The single line said by the reaper irritated him. “Speak.”

“As you wish, Master. Slater will name the rat, but Slater wants something in return. It's only fair, Master.”

Talha's throat closed as the familiar rage that lack of control always stirred in him throbbed in his fingertips. Getting sick of the reaper's games, he asked, “What do you want? Money?”

“Master doesn't learn,” the liquid voice drawled, ringing with displeasure. “Slater keeps saying, but Master never listens. Slater. Doesn't. Need. Money. Slater will name the rat, but Master stays with Slater tonight. Master has to stop running. Tonight, Master, you stay with Slater.”

“It's a party tonight,” Talha reasoned. “A lot of people will be here. Some will stay over.”



“Tonight, Master, or no deal.” Slater’s face darkened, which only intensified his bright, hungry eyes.

“Fine,” Talha said through gritted teeth. “If you say the truth, I’ll spend the night with you. But listen carefully, if you drop fake accusations or can’t prove your words, I’m going to burn you alive and watch you squirm. Is it clear?”

“Crystal.” Slater grinned.

Someone knocked, and the door creaked open. Darting a glance down the corridor, Dinçer stepped in.

“What the hell is going on, Talha? What are you, in love or your girlfriend is pregnant? You daydreamed during the meeting. And a party?” Disregarding Slater’s presence, he ambled through the room. “I had plans for tonight.”

Talha didn’t know what to say. The grain of doubt, the reaper planted, gave the first sprout. Instead of answering his friend, he pressed Slater. “Name. Now.”

A superior smile touched the plump mouth as the reaper slowly, playfully, dragged his lazy gaze over Dinçer.

“No games.”

Smile dropping under Talha’s deathly glare, Slater slurred mimicking Salik’s speech, “Fine. It’s Toothless.”

“Are you talking cartoons?” Dinçer’s gaze fixed on Slater, disapproval tugged the corners of his lips downwards. “I don’t care who you are, but get up from Reis’ bed right now. Where are your manners?”

Talha laughed as the realization hit. “You don’t even know his name. How can I believe you? I must be out of my mind.”

Slater paled, shooting to his feet. “Slater never lies, Master.”

“Let’s pretend I believe you. Tell me, why on earth did you attend the meeting? Did you do it with Behçet? How many people know who you are? Why on earth do I need a reaper who is a walking target?”

“Don’t worry, Master. Slater never attended Behçet’s meetings. Slater wasn’t interested. Only your people know,” he pointed toward Dinçer with his chin. “Should Slater kill them?”

“No. Why did you attend now?” Talha narrowed his eyes. The events didn’t make sense to him.

“The rat is in the house. Master is careless. Slater should protect.”

“Oh my god...” The splitting headache, settling, made thinking difficult. Approaching the window, Talha opened the wooden leaf, letting in the smell of heated dust.

“Am I missing something?” Dinçer frowned. Body tensing, his feet took a defensive stance.

“Slater says I have a toothless rat in my house,” Talha’s face refused to drop that tight, jaw-numbing smile.

“A toothless rat?” Dinçer repeated.

“Salik,” Talha spat out the name.

“Salik is the rat?” Dinçer considered the words for a moment before he burst out laughing. “You say he rats us out to the cops? Impossible. Also, Salik is an old friend. You talk nonsense.”

“Not cops, no.” Slater’s restless fingers fumbled over his black pants as if he was looking for the comfort the weapon provided, except today he didn’t carry anything. “To Behçet Asani.”

“It’s very comfortable, isn’t it? He is dead, so he can’t confirm or deny anything you say.” Talha smirked.

Pushing away from the windowsill, he circled Slater then stopped behind his back. “Why should I believe you? Salik and I have been working together for years. He had always been loyal. Do you have any proof?”

Palms clasping around Slater’s throat, Talha counted his pulse. Slow at first, it quickened as the seconds ticked. The thought that it must be fear disappeared, as the familiar color of arousal touched Slater’s cheeks. Talha dropped his hands.

“Slater never lies, Master,” the reaper croaked, slowly turning around. His eyes, burning with desire, fixed on Talha, pupils blown.

“Fine,” Talha gave up, hoping Dinçer didn’t notice Slater’s arousal. “Can you prove your words? I can’t kill a person based solely on your word.”

“No?” Slater’s head tilted to the side. “Too bad. Master should start trusting Slater.”

Dinçer laughed, earning a dark glare from the reaper. “Go and tell this to Behçet, you renegade. No one will ever trust you

here.”

“Is that so?” Slater’s facial muscle tensed, making his expression insane with the mix of anger and lust in it. “Master will. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but Master will.”

“Enough,” Talha cut him off before Slater could say something inappropriate. “Prove your words now.”

“As you wish, Master...” Slater hissed. “Two weeks before the mosque shootout, Toothless met Behçet. They talked for forty minutes before they shook on a deal.”

“Which deal?”

“Toothless is being late to the mosque, so Talha doesn’t get support in time. Toothless helps Behçet to kill Talha, and they share Istanbul.”

“Didn’t you say you weren’t present in any of Behçet’s meetings?” Dinçer interrupted.

“Slater wasn’t invited, so Slater remained in shadows.”

“Eavesdropped?” Dinçer scoffed, and Slater grinned.

“Yes.”

“Why do you even want him, Talha? He is a traitor. He will betray you too.”

“Let’s imagine I believe you,” Talha ignored Dinçer’s remark. “Can you prove this?”

“Proof...” Slater stretched the vowels as he shuffled up to a window and peered out. “I’ll bring you the proof tonight.”

“Don’t show up without it,” Talha said, bringing his attention to his friend. “Help me to arrange the party. I’m running out of time.”

Without a word, Slater stole to the door, but Dinçer’s hand seized his elbow. “Wait. I want to ask you something.”

Slater snarled. “No one touches Slater.”

“Sorry.” Stepping back, Dinçer gave the reaper space. “In the mosque, there was a teenage boy. Do you know him?”

“Yes,” was Slater’s only reply, but contempt poisoned his beautiful features.

“Tell me about him.”

“Why?”

“Because I have him.”

“Little Ifrīt<sup>[21]</sup> is alive?” Slater’s eyes hardened.

“Ifrīt?”

“Behçet was greedy. Iblīs wasn’t enough, so he found Ifrīt.”

“I haven’t heard of him.” Glancing at Talha, Dinçer shrugged.

“He wasn’t fully active,” Slater explained, his expression a mix of boredom and annoyance, as if the topic irritated him.

“Why did he want someone else?” It was the first time he’d heard about Ifrīt as well. If the boy was at least half as capable as Slater, maybe he didn’t need Iblīs. “Did he want to get rid of you?”

“No.” Pure, boiling rage resounded in a short reply. “Behçet wanted little Ifrīt around all the time. So young, so pretty. Boys like him are harder to break than girls. Still, they are so delicate, so innocent.”

*Is this jealousy? Talha guessed, peering into Slater’s features. Did he kill Behçet because of Ifrīt?*

“This is sick. I don’t believe you,” Dinçer deadpanned.

“Your call.” Slater’s tight-lipped smile grew, turning evil, and Talha knew he didn’t lie.

“How old is he?” Red spots of anger popped over Dinçer’s neck as he squared his jaw. “What’s his name?”

“Why? Do you want to fuck little Ifrīt too? Not that I care...”

“You are sick and should be put down.” Fingers twitching, as if wanting to touch the familiar coolness of steel, Dinçer scowled.

“Enough,” Talha raised his palm. “Reply. Now.”

“Savaş. He is fifteen.”

“Fifteen? This is sick.” Stabbing his fingers into his hair, Dinçer spun on his heels and tugged at his scalp, messing his already disheveled hair.

“When were you going to tell me? Is it the boy with the Uzi who shot at me?” Talha crossed his arms over his chest. He didn’t like secrets, not when it came to work.

“Well, yeah...” The man sighed, then confessed, “I didn’t know if he would survive. The bullet fractured his jaw. He had major blood loss and spent the last weeks in coma. There was nothing to report. He woke up yesterday, but refuses to talk.”

“Put him down,” Slater said without compassion. “Little Ifrīt is nothing without his pretty face.”

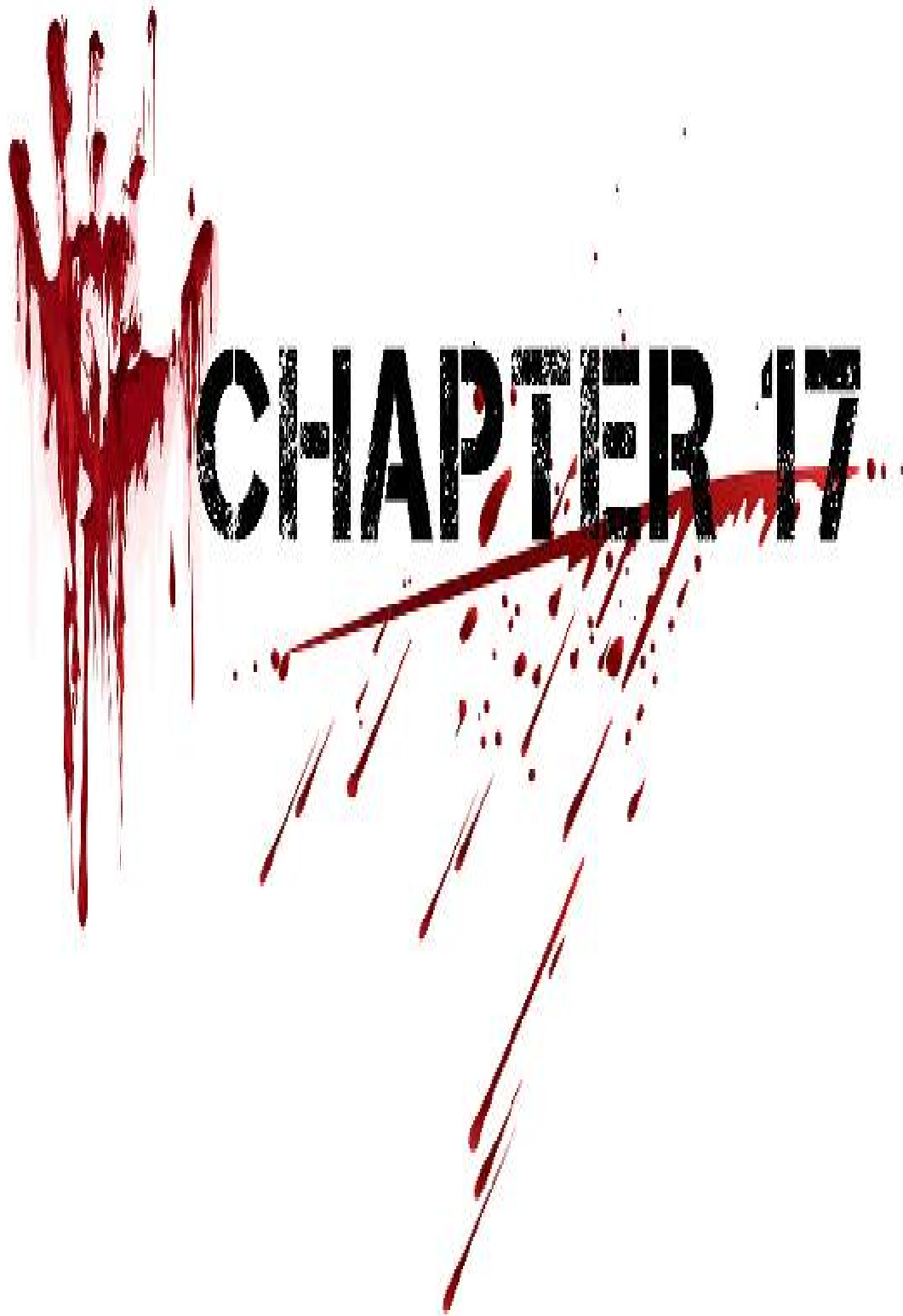
“Shut up. No one wants your opinion.”

Talha’s headache intensified as he listened to the two men fight.

“Keep an eye on him. If you can’t convert him, put him down. Now, help me with the party.” Talha said, finishing the conversation. “Slater, you go get your proof.”



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**GHOSTLY HANDS OF WARM**, gentle breeze caressed Talha's skin under his shirt as he stood in the garden behind his mansion. The Ney flute music streamed in the air, as orange light, coming from torches and the massive fireplace in the center of the garden,

glinted on the glasses and plates. Long tables, covered with white silk, circled the fireplace.

Peals of laughter rollicked in the night, as the men drank and smoked shisha and hashish. Slender bodies of belly-dancers, hiding behind transparent scarves, entranced the men in the millennium-old dance of seduction. Golden coins and glass beads, embroidered into their clothes, sparkled and attracted gazes to the soft curves of their bodies, dressed in nothing but bedlah<sup>[22]</sup>.

Seeking Salik, Talha passed from one table to another, encouraging people to drink more, and therefore stay longer. As he passed the unlit area, he saw a long, pale leg wrapped around Güvenç's hip as the man pinned a woman to a tree. His heavy pants joining her high-pitched ones. Talha strolled away. The only place he hadn't searched yet was the hidden bower, deeper in the garden.

"Midnight," Dinçer said, approaching him from behind. "He isn't coming, and you can't stop people from leaving."

"I know..." Talha growled his annoyance. "Go, find Salik. Make sure he is having fun and doesn't want to leave. Get him drunk, if needed, but don't let him leave."

Cheek jerking, Talha marched through the garden and found a smaller young woman dressed in white, with an almost non-existent top and a transparent skirt that bared her legs with every sway of her hips. Her coal eyes had reddish, demonic glints of the open fire in them. At any other time, Talha would have dragged her upstairs into his bedroom, but not today.

"Come with me." Grabbing her wrist, he tugged her toward the bower; her white bedlah swishing with every step taken as she staggered after him barefoot.

"What are you doing, Master?" The liquid voice, coming from behind, stopped him on his tracks.

"You are late." Talha faced the reaper.

"You didn't really miss me, as I can see." Giving a hard stare to the dancer, Slater circled them, eyeing the woman up and down. "She is pretty."

"Wait," he ordered Slater before addressing the woman. "See the bower? Go there and make sure my friends are having fun. No one can leave, you understand? Do that, and you will be generously rewarded."



With a quick nod, the brunette sashayed toward the torch-lit area.

“You are late,” Talha repeated, facing Slater again.

The reaper stood with his hands curled up in front of his chest, his nose tugging at the air. “Master didn’t fuck the woman. Good.”

Trying to ignore the remark, Talha asked, “Did you bring the proof?”

“Yes,” Pulling a thin Smartphone out of his pocket he offered it to Talha, but his hand froze half-way. “Master stays with Slater tonight. No women.”

Without answering, Talha snatched the device out of the Reaper’s hands. “What am I looking at?”

“Behçet’s phone.”

Talha sighed, thumbing the screen. “It’s locked.”

“Try Ifrīt,” his acrid words drowned in the whistle of appreciation coming from the bower.

Lifting a brow, Talha typed the name. The phone chimed, unlocking.

Talha concentrated, scrolling through contacts, messenger history, phone records, voice messages, and installed apps. Entering the cell phone provider’s app, Talha requested the call detail record.

“Fuck my life...” he breathed, as pieces of a puzzle clicked together, revealing the picture of betrayal. Someone named ‘Toothless’ had a long and entertaining discussion with the owner of the phone he held. Talha didn’t need to be a genius to figure out that the reference Mardin’in Piçi <sup>[23]</sup> was about him, and that Slater was right. Toothless set him up.

Without sparing Slater a second glance, Talha stormed toward the bower. Five men, including Dinçer and Salik, sat around the table drinking whiskey. The woman he’d sent danced close to the fire. Seeing Talha, Dinçer got up and stood by his side, question in his burning gaze.

Showing him the display, Talha thumbed the name Toothless.

Salik blinked with heavy lids as his phone chimed. Pulling it out of his jacket’s pocket, he stared at the screen. Merriment gone, he sobered up.

“Take his phone,” Talha ordered, ignoring the concerned gazes of his lieutenants. Leaping toward the traitor, Dinçer fetched his phone, showing Talha a screen that said ‘Behçet Asani’.

“Talha, it’s not what it looks like...” Salik paled, sweat beading on his narrow forehead. He gawked around, searching for support in the familiar faces, but met no sympathy. Only questions.

“What’s going on?” someone asked. People drew to the small bower, and the warm night became stuffy.

“Isn’t it?” Talha said without a smile. “I think it’s clear as a day. Dinçer, take him to the basement.”

“No! No, Talha! We are friends, aren’t we? Listen to me!” Screams choked in the night as Dinçer dragged the man away, but no one paid any attention to the prisoner. All gazes were glued to Talha.

“Gentlemen, I’ll be waiting for you in the Grand Hall in ten minutes to announce the Royal Game.”



**THE MANSION QUIETED DOWN** as the events drained people of merriment and intoxication. Even Slater stopped smiling as he propped up against the wall of the Grand Hall. No one interrupted Talha’s long explanation about the betrayal and setup. No one said anything when Talha commemorated the names of those who died in

the mosque. A few people requested to see the phone, but at the end of the meeting, everyone agreed that Talha had the right to invoke the Royal Game.

Pressing his palms against the wooden table, Talha looked every man in the eye. “We need five people in the jury. Please, draw lots.”

The transparent jar, containing black, glossy spheres stood at the farther end of the table, opposite to Talha.

Approaching it, Güvenç tugged the first sphere out and screwed it open. Looking inside for long five seconds, he announced, “The walī <sup>[24]</sup> of the slain.”

After Güvenç stepped aside, each man except Slater, Dinçer, and Talha took the remaining balls that divided them between the jury or the walī of the slain.

When the jar emptied, Talha announced, “The day after tomorrow at seven PM, I expect you to join the Royal Game in the hunting lodge in the Yenice forest. The weapon is the Turkish bow. The game will last for three days. Those who miss the game will share Salik’s destiny.”

With short nods, the men left his house. Listening for the distancing footfalls, Talha felt the weight of his promise landing on his shoulders. Trying to push the tension out of his body with a breath, he hung his head and closed his eyes. The polished wood under his palms warmed and moistened beneath his grip.

“Say, Master...” Slater’s voice sounded sickening-sweet as he closed the Grand Hall doors, then slithered around the table, before freezing behind Talha’s back. Talha expected to receive a sex proposition or a touch on his body. Instead, Slater asked, “...what’s the Royal Game?”

Talha wavered. Someone who came from the West couldn’t possibly understand the honor of blood-revenge, least of all someone like Slater. Still, he faced the reaper and tried to explain as best as he could.

“If the blood of kin has been violated, a man has the right to seek blood-revenge from the man who caused harm. When the harm was done by one to many, we call the Royal Game to seek justice.” Slater’s expression didn’t change remaining questioning, so he continued, “The day after tomorrow, the male members of the families Salik wronged will gather in the hunting lodge in the Yenice

forest to manhunt. We take horses and bows and give Salik two hours of headstart. If he can survive in the forest for three days, he is free to leave. No arrow can be directed to his head or vital organs. If an arrow hits the target, he must be given one more hour to escape. Then, the game resumes. The game lasts until he bleeds out or three days have passed.”

“Why do you need a jury?” Slater inched closer; the warmth of his body seeping under Talha’s white shirt.

“It’s a tradition,” Talha explained, trying to stay unaffected. “Five impartial people have to supervise the game to make sure no one kills Salik out of pity or, if he survives for three days, there is no vengeance to follow.”

“What does walī mean?” Slater shifted, his arm brushing against Talha’s sleeve.

Talha’s skin crawled from the discomfort. The hostage of his own word, he stood still, allowing the back of Slater’s hand to skid against his. “Walī is an Islamic term. It means a holy man, protector, or helper. If a grieving family has no male members left who are capable of wielding arms, they choose a man to execute their revenge. The avenger is called the walī of the slain. By accepting the honor of the blood revenge, he becomes the protector and guardian of the family.”

“Why would your men want that, Master? Sounds troublesome.”

Looking into the transparent eyes, Talha once again realized the insurmountable differences separating them. “What defines a man, Slater?”

“Power?” Slater’s immediate reply made Talha hum.

“No. Honor. Family. Responsibility. Men who join me are ready to give away their lives. They want to know that even if they die, their families will be taken care of, especially, if there are no male members left. Do you understand what I’m saying? They are loyal to me because they know I will take care of them without exception.”

“Family is a weakness.” Slater’s sweet breath touched Talha’s face. “Slater doesn’t need family.”

“You are still too young,” Talha said. “Everything could change.”

“Does it mean Master will take care of Slater?”

It took Talha all his will power not to look away from the lustful gaze. “Yes, if you are loyal.”

“Like a godfather?”

Despite the tense situation, Talha laughed. “Something like that.”

“Slater wants to go hunting with Master.” Blue eyes flared with something dark, brutal.

“You can’t.” Shrugging the reaper’s request off, Talha pushed away from the table and strode toward the double door of the Grand Hall.

“Why not? Why master can and Slater can’t?” In a blink of an eye, Slater’s body blocked his path. His facial muscles strained, eyes narrowed, and teeth glinted from under the drawn-up lip.

“Because it’s... honor killing to seek blood-revenge. Salik didn’t wrong you, so you have no right to steal revenge from the rightful claimers.”

“I can be the walī of the slain,” Slater retorted. Talha chuckled, realizing that this confirmed his suspicion about Slater’s inability to understand their culture.

“No, you can’t. It’s a tradition. You aren’t a Muslim man, you don’t believe in Allah, and you are a foreigner. You are an outsider, and most importantly, you won’t become the protector of a family. It’s a huge responsibility. No one will pick you, and even if someone does, I’ll never allow you to become a guardian of a family.” To make sure Slater took his words seriously, Talha added, “If you interrupt the Royal Game, you replace Salik.”

“Huh? Sounds fun!” The maddened glint in the depth of the blue eyes intensified.

Talha grabbed Slater’s shoulders. The thought that the reaper would hinder the Royal Game painted his world bright red. Too tired to deal with this shit, he roared, adding the clear message into his voice, “You won’t dishonor me like this. Is it clear?”

Slater’s jaw tensed, and he hissed, “Crystal, Master...”

“Good. Now go and check the mansion before you go to bed.” Pushing the reaper away, Talha marched out of the Grand Hall and headed for his bedroom.

He showered, mentally preparing himself to keep his promise. To buy more time, he shaved. Running out of excuses to stay in the bathroom, he headed to bed. Since Slater wasn't in the room, he killed the lights and, for half of the night, he lay awake, blinking at the ceiling. The reaper never came.



## **PRESENT**

**THICK FOG STUFFED TALHA'S HEAD**, and he wasn't sure if he could hear anything with his left ear. The drumming of the blood in his temples and his cut eyebrow set nagging pain in the depth of his skull. The tiny noise in his ear didn't let him sleep. His joints hurt from immobility, his skin, increasingly sensitive, felt every little bump of the rough floor, as maddening thirst wrenched his muscles and stretched every second into an agonizing eternity.

Lying on the floor and watching Slater's back, Talha tried to find a single positive trait in his reaper but failed. Selfish, demanding, cruel, needy, capricious, and short-tempered, Slater had nothing good in him, yet Talha had never been able to tear his gaze away from him. It started with awareness and caution, but soon morphed into a weird captivation he couldn't find a reason for.

A spider, landing on his face, thrust Talha out of his lethargy. Grinding his teeth, he shook his head. Hurt, annoyed, thirsty, he felt

the growing need to take a leak brimming again, and that alone irritated every nerve in his body. Not willing to wait for Slater to decide his future, he kicked the reaper between his shoulder blades. Mentally preparing to face the angry outburst, he clenched his fists, but the younger man only shuffled to the wall, farther away from Talha.

“Urght-ugh!” Talha growled, but the duct tape morphed Slater’s name into something unrecognizable.

When minutes stretched and Slater didn’t spare him a glance, Talha wrapped his fingers around the ropes. Trying not to look at Camilla’s head on his right, he turned his body ninety degrees and pressed his feet against the wall at either side of the wall ring. Tugging and swaying the rope left and right, he used all his strength to loosen the stone and wrench the ring out of the wall. At some point, Slater raised his head. The gaze he granted Talha was heavy and muddy, but his attention didn’t stay on his prisoner for long. Unsteady on his feet, he got up and shuffled out of the room.

Time stretched into eternity. The chill from the ground crawled into his marrow, making every bone hurt. His wrists, sore and raw from tugging the rope, forced Talha to stop the attempts to wrench out the wall ring. Panting into the darkness, he pressed his wrist to the ground and started rubbing, hoping that the uneven floor could eventually chafe through the rope.



**HE'D TAKEN NO PLEASURE** in watching Master bleed. There was no cleansing pain when Slater had crashed his fists against the brick wall. He'd lain down. The comforting warmth, coming from Master's body, managed to calm him, but the kick between his shoulder blades thrust him out of the serenity Master's touch always provided. Now, he had nothing. Only the bone-deep chill that wasn't caused by weather. The vacuum-like emptiness that reigned in his chest, the sluggishness of his mind, and the lack of desires.

The stench of death, crawling under his skin, made him feel dead. The longer he stayed with Talha, the weaker he felt. Needing to get away, Slater ignored Master's muffled outburst and stumbled out of the chamber, unsteady on his feet.

Many times in his life, Slater had been close to dying, yet he had never felt this dead. Until now. His body was healthy, but he felt no more alive than Camilla's dusty head.

*Maybe even more dead. At least she is still angry at Master. Still glaring. Slater isn't even mad...*

"Why?" he mouthed. He had no reason to feel this empty. He should be celebrating his freedom as he had done with Behçet's death.



*In a few days, Talha will die, and I will be free again. Then I'll find a new master. New sensations. New contracts. New games. New hands to touch Slater. Slater should celebrate.*

Hurrying out of the dim catacombs, Slater tugged fresh air into his lungs, then strolled toward the Sultanahmet Square, blending with the night.



**SLATER ALWAYS FOUND JOY** in food. If there was one thing he could never live without, it would be sweets. Eastern sweets were the best, and for this simple reason, Slater had ended up in Turkey. Nougat, pişmaniye, locum, baklava, tavuk göğsü, helva—everything he ever loved, everything that made him feel alive, now revolted him, making him feel sick instead.

*Why? Why does Slater feel this way? He thought as the air refused to fill his lungs. Slater must be broken. If Slater is broken but Master is fine... Does it mean Master won? Anger stirred in his chest as he remembered how Talha traded him to a woman. No, Master can't win. Dead don't win. If Slater is broken, Master has to break as well.*

The night sky, clear and bright with scatterings of stars only a moment ago, darkened with every step as he retreated from the well-illuminated square into the dark alley.

He needed to kill. To pluck pulsing life from a living body. To stare into the fading light of frozen pupils. To sink his hands in hot blood of his victims. Then, maybe, he would bounce back to his old, calm self. Then, maybe, he would be able to kill Master.



**THICK AND GRAY**, the clouds crashed against each other above his head, promising to throw the Earth into the sparkling madness of the storm any moment. Electricity charged the air. It was everywhere: in the rustle of the foliage; in the low, howling wind; in the dry, thirsty ground. Usually, it would absorb into his blood, spark under his skin, and recharge him with a familiar thirst for blood. His thumb mindlessly stroked over the top of his swollen hand, where Master's last gift throbbed with pain. He felt nothing. No excitement, no needs, and even pain was rather dull, sickening.

He looked around. Istanbul had become his home long ago. He loved it for the sole reason that at any time of day, he attracted attention. Here, he didn't need to look for outlets for his frustration, as trouble followed him around. Here, he didn't need to look for victims. Killing was so simple in Istanbul, and for this sole reason, he always felt like he belonged here. Just like now.

Footfalls rebounded in the night. Predatory, quiet, approaching. He knew they tracked him for the last ten minutes, checking him out and waiting for the opportunity any dark street

would provide. Slater didn't bother to guess their motives. A European man, walking in the Anatolian side of the city at night, was a perfect target for robbery and mugging.

He closed his eyes, listening. Five people? No, four. Slater didn't need to look back. Two of them were lighter than the others. One had shorter legs, as his steps were almost twice as frequent. One was heavy and huffed every ten seconds. Slater sucked air into his lungs, but only the stench of garbage tamped his nostrils. He knew they would reach him in about ten seconds, so he slowed down and raised his eyes to the swirling gray clouds.

*Nine...* He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath.

*Eight.* A warm needle slipped into his palm and his fingers curled around it.

*Seven.* He bent left, stretching his spine.

*Six.* His skin crawled, as their hungry gazes licked his back.

*Five.* The stone shifted under someone's foot.

*Four.* Slater opened his eyes, keeping his pace steady.

*Three.* He exhaled, concentrating on a single spot in his chest, trying to stir the common thirst.

*Two.* Hunching forward, Slater stepped back.

"One." He spun, ducking under the hand of the massively built, bald man. His needle swished through the air before sinking into the soft spot under his double chin. He jerked the needle away. Blood burst from the dark hole in the throat, spraying over Slater's hand and the man's dirty-white tank top. Warm and sticky, the sensation was familiar yet foreign. It didn't excite him, but Slater had no time to think about it.

The bald man huffed and clutched at his throat, as two tall men, packed in almost identical leather jackets, attacked him from two directions. Their knives glinted in the yellowish streetlight. Spinning the slacking body of the wounded, he shoved it toward the bigger one, using it as a shield. The needle sicked out of his hand and clanged against the asphalt; he snatched the karambit a second before a blade of the third, slender man swished toward his liver. Letting the weapon pass under his arm, Slater passed the karambit from his right hand to the left before shouldering the attacker in the chest. The metal claw dug in the man's back; he yanked his hand

toward himself, making sure the length stayed as deep as possible before he jumped back.

Confusion flickered in the stranger's green eyes as he dropped his gaze to the blood pooling on the asphalt.

Giving the green-eyed man a kick to the stomach, he swirled, the blade caught the throat of the bald man who still somehow remained on his feet. One fast slash and cascades of blood rushed down on the asphalt and over the third, bigger man who didn't seem to know what to do, attack Slater or help his comrade.

"You bastard," someone yelled from behind, and Slater darted a glance back. Short legs, short arms, and a bigger head; the man was disproportionate and looked harmless.

*Can I kill him?* Slater thought, cocking his head. *Will Master get mad if I kill him? Is he untouchable like women and children?*

Someone bumped against his back. A hand reached from behind and stabbed him from the front. His stomach caught on fire. Slater blinked, watching the knife sink below his right rib. He blinked again, unable to believe his eyes. Slater had many scars. Many times a stray bullet hit him, but he had never been ashamed of any of them. Until now.

*How could I let this thug wound me?* He didn't know, and that exterminated the apathy out of his body, awakening uncontrollable rage.

He laughed at himself. At his misery and weakness. At the stupid mistake he made in the fight.

*Everyone should pay for their mistakes. No exception.* Ignoring the bigger man who carelessly left his knife in Slater's body, he drove the blade into the dwarf's eye and twisted it in the skull. *Master made Slater weak. Master made Slater useless. Weak should die. It's evolution.*

The roar of pure agony, tearing from the dwarf's lips threw red frenzy over Slater's eyes. Fishing out his second karambit, he turned to the remaining man. Bloody hands trembled as the man stared at him in shock. Without his knife, he didn't dare to approach.

"Now it's your turn to die. Nothing personal. It's evolution," he said with a comforting nod. "Come, Iblīs will send you to hell."



**THE RUSTLE OF FOLIAGE FILLED HIS EARS.** In seconds, the already dark street blackened. The wind tossed sand into his face, swiping the streets of cigarette butts, plastic bags, and fallen leaves. The dust swirled around him and disappeared as a loud **SHHHH** joined the massive, oblique downpour. His clothes soaked through; blood washed off his hands. The bright flash blinded him and a rollicking **BOOM** shattered the world. He felt as if nature was trying to give him the answer, but he was too stupid to understand it.

His wound oozed with hotness, and at some point, despite knowing better, he pulled the knife out of his stomach. The streets that never die stood desolate, just like the soul he never knew he possessed. He'd heard the words depression and apathy before, but he thought that people made them up, they seemed so unrealistic to him. Now he understood how dull and scary life was without desires.

Ozone suffused the air, and Slater felt the cool tongue of a strong breeze on his neck.

“Huh...” He tilted his head, tagging the freshness into his lungs. “That must be how death is. So cold. So lonely. And smells like ozone...”

His mind trailed to Camilla. She didn't smell like ozone.

*Maybe this is how smokeless fire smells in contact with water? Does water kill smokeless fire?* Slater took in the stormy sky, his adrenaline dropped and his body shook. He knew he would collapse within half an hour, maybe sooner, if he didn't treat the wound, yet he didn't care. Water deluged his eyes and gushed down his neck, and at that moment, all the mosques started the Fajr prayer<sup>[25]</sup>. *It's sunrise already?*

He searched the sky in vain for evidence of the sun.

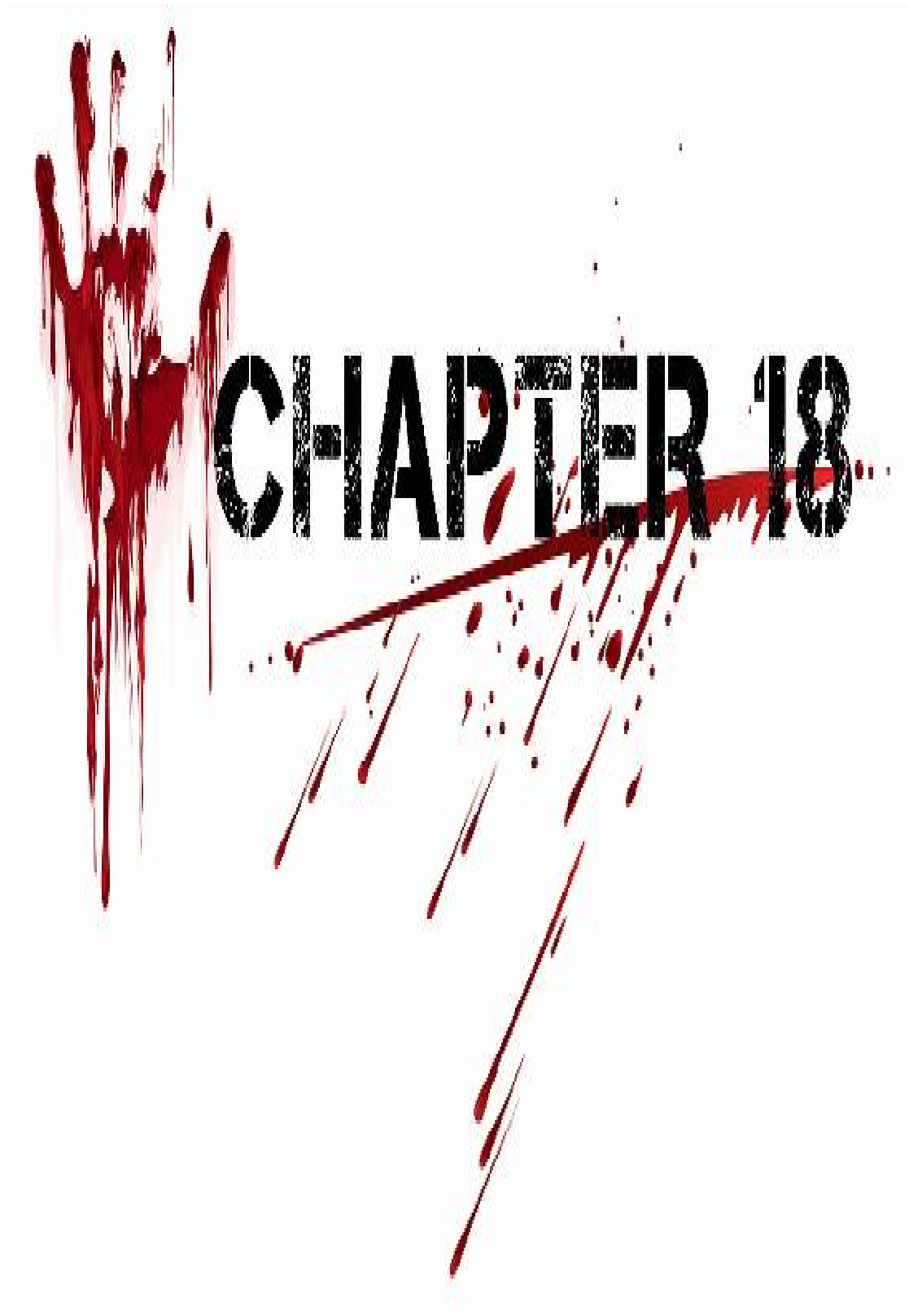
*Huh? Funny, as if the sun died. I hoped to see the color, the same as Master's eyes. He cocked his head. I guess this is how Iblīs dies. He doesn't deserve sun, because he's weak. Will Iblīs be disintegrated now? Is it why it smells like ozone? Is it why Slater is so cold and empty? Is it what happens when Master wins?*

His exhausted mind, never finding rest, jumped from one memory to another. He remembered how his attachment to Talha had grown. How he realized that his eyes had been following the powerful frame of his Master not out of boredom, but with curiosity and weird fascination. He'd enjoyed the sounds of Master's calm voice, his battling expressions when Slater irritated him, and his detailed explanations of things Slater didn't understand. Meaningless things that made Master look... borderline to weak, yet somehow strong. Captivating.

And the pivoting moment of Slater's attraction had been the Royal Game.



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**5 YEARS AGO**

**CROUCHING ON THE MANSION'S** roof, Slater couldn't keep his fingers from curling in powerless fury. The heat, rising from the



tile toasted under the vicious summer sun, assaulted his skin and his unblinking eyes. Yet, he never lowered his gaze, watching his master load his car, ready to leave for the Royal Game.

Talha's words still echoed in his head, repeating over and over for him not to follow, not to kill, not to leave the house. Giving Slater the final instructions, Talha had warned him that the security was set to guard the perimeter with the permission to shoot Slater if he engaged. Looking Slater in the eye, Talha had asked if he needed to explain what would happen if one of his men died. Slater said nothing, and Master reminded him of the reason the Royal Game had been called, to begin with.

The cellphone chimed. Slater inched forward, fingers gripping the edge of the scorching roof in front of him. Freezing in a gargoyle pose, he turned all ears.

“Oh, Ejder, selamün aleyküm<sup>[26]</sup>. Where are you?” Talha's face lit up as he put a C-shaped unstrung bow into the trunk. Slater's eyes glued to the weapon as his fingers itched to touch it.

He had never seen a Turkish bow in real life, and he couldn't wait to see what it would be like once ready; to caress the textures of horn, wood, and sinew; to draw a string and feel an arrow vibrate with pressure in his hand. One of the most efficient 'cold' weapons ever devised lay mere feet away from him, yet unreachable.

“Ready for some hunting?”

The sound of Talha's voice hurled him out of his daydreaming, his cheek twitched. *So, Slater is an outsider; Slater doesn't understand; Slater isn't good enough because Slater is a foreigner, but Ejder can? How is it fair?*

“Yes, Ejder. Great, meet me at the farmhouse.”

*Slater was loyal. Slater waited. Slater gave Master time, but Master doesn't want to understand.*

“No, Dinçer is taking him.”

*Dinçer? He didn't even have a scratch, yet he is going as well. Slater was in the mosque, like Dinçer. Slater has the right to be there. Slater wants to use the bow! Stupid Master...*

Rage urged him to climb down the drainpipe. Snaking out of the bush, he froze behind Talha. So close, he could easily send a needle into the man's nape, yet Talha never noticed.

*So careless... You can't even see me in the daylight, yet you refuse Iblīs' protection...*

"So long, Kardeşim." Talha hung up.

"How many Royal Games were there, Master?"

Talha's body tensed for a brief, dissatisfying moment, before the calm reply sounded, "I'm not sure. This is my second." Slamming the trunk closed, he spun. "Why?"

Their eyes locked. Being sucked into the liquid amber, Slater thought that maybe Dinçer was right and Master would never accept him, would never treat him like his own, would never rely on him.

*Maybe, if Master had no one, things would be different.*

"No reason, Master. Have fun!" Raising his hands in surrender, Slater smiled, his anger draining as an idea formed in his head.

For a long moment, Talha examined his face with a furrow between his brows. "No matter what, don't leave the house."

"Don't worry, Master. Slater will be good." His grin widened, causing Talha's frown to deepen.

Without saying another word, Talha got into his bulletproof Audi A7 and guided the car to the driveway. The cloud of dust, swirling in the air, grayed Slater's black combat pants.

The car disappeared behind the gates. Slater squatted and examined the tire print. *You wanna have some fun, Master? But what fun is it to chase a harmless victim? Why don't we change the rules?*

His finger glided over the tire texture before he got to his feet and raced toward the fence.

No one stopped him.



**SLATER'S BLACK, DUAL SPORTS** motorcycle caught up with Talha's car in half an hour. The backpack heavy on his shoulders, Slater slowed down, and for the next three hours, he had to stop every now and then to grab some sugary treats, equipment, and allow a bigger distance, so his bike wouldn't rub in Talha's face.

Tracking down Talha became easier when he took a country road. In the dry dirt, Slater's eyes picked up his tire print as if it was luminescent. By the time he arrived at the farmhouse that bordered both, the forest and the clear field, many expensive cars were parked on the driveway.

Leaving his motorcycle in the forest, Slater camouflaged it with a green and brown military cover and tree branches, then stole toward the farmhouse.

Horses had already been saddled and stood outside. Their soft huffing and neighs of anticipation joined the low buzzing of the summer field and the smell of mown grass and manure.

Lurking in the shadows, he crept up to one. Stronger than the others, it was probably prepared for someone heavy. Its dun coat glazed with pink in the setting sun, which only accented the white star mark on its forehead.

The horse's ears twitched as it pawed the ground, but Slater, catching the reins, patted its nose. Calming down, the animal let him closer.

"Easy," Slater hissed, stroking the horse's side before he slipped his palm under the girth and grabbed the saddle buckle. Pushing the throwing needle out of the loop, he shoved it between the metal parts and used it as a lever. With a decent effort, the tongue and layer broke off, releasing the belt. Fiddling with it, he reassembled the whole thing so it appeared whole again.

Swallowing the sweet taste of victory, he drifted into the foliage, waiting. People inside the house drank and ate; the glee in the air so potent it made him sick. Through the windows, he caught the glimpses of Talha too. With his hair messy and changed into a long-sleeve black shirt with epaulets and black cargo pants, he looked younger. For some reason, his confident look rubbed Slater the wrong way. He shrunk back into the woods.

The sun hovered above the forest. Slater had grown tired of waiting when men littered the small farmyard. He recognized most of them, but some new faces wore gloomy, dark expressions. Watching them move, Slater suspected that they were related to those who died in the shootout. Simple-mannered, they lacked that predatory aura Talha's men possessed.

A few people carried bows, but most of them seemed terribly underequipped for a three-day-long hunt. Slater wondered if the main equipment was stored in the hunting lodge. He regretted not checking. Ruining a few bows sounded fun. Too bad it was too late now.

Attaching saddlebags, Talha's men checked the horses, before mounting them. Blindfolded and with his hands cuffed in front of him, Salik was forced onto the spare horse that was bound to the gray one Dinçer rode. Güvenç strode to the beige horse with the white marking. Slater grinned. He was right about that horse, and he suspected that the black Arabian stallion waited for Talha.

When Master left the house, Slater counted the men.

"Eighteen little mafia boys went out to hunt..." Mood lifting, Slater murmured under his breath as he watched Güvenç tug the horse toward the wooden fence to mount it. Using the lower bar for support, Güvenç shoved his foot in the stirrup, huffed, and threw his leg over the horseback. The buckle fell apart. The saddle slipped, and Güvenç's back flopped across the wooden fence. The top bar

snapped in two under his weight; he tumbled onto the ground, his bushy head resting in manure.

Someone cackled, someone dismounted and rushed toward him. Güvenç sat up, gasped, palmed the spot on his lower back, and fell back onto the ground.

Satisfied, Slater grinned and jogged toward the forest, leaving the commotion behind.

“One broke his back, and then there were seventeen.”

Slater didn't need to keep his eyes on them. They made so much noise and left so many trails that even a blind person couldn't lose them. Slater wasn't blind.

Even though Slater didn't ride a horse, he didn't have a problem keeping up. The forest was dense enough to allow him to walk close to his Master yet stay hidden in the foliage. Riding the black Arabian stallion, Talha led the group down a narrow path. Not frequently used, it overgrew with weeds, and Talha had to shield his face with his arm from stray twigs.

The sun ducked behind the horizon when the group reached the hunting lodge. The large, two-story building resembled a small fortress with stone and wooden cladding and vertical arrow slits that were shielded from inside. Golden light streamed out of wide windows, welcoming the travelers. Each window had a metal rolling shutter above.

By the sole look of the house, Slater knew the hunt won't begin here. Located in an open space, it provided a hunted person the opportunity to set traps or trail back the way they'd come. Slater winced, realizing that he had to spend a whole night in the forest, full of mosquitoes, spiders, snakes, and centipedes; his good mood dispersed.

A few locals left the building. Greetings exchanged, they took care of horses, as the travelers disappeared indoors.

Through the windows, Slater saw Talha going upstairs. The second floor lit up with golden light. Slater craved to go inside and stay in the same room. It was his place, his right. It was the part of the deal his master refused to keep.

A sting to his neck got him going. Though horseflies disappeared with dusk, mosquitoes never stopped their feast.

By the time Slater completed a circle around the lodge, most windows blacked out. The atmosphere calmed down, and after exploring the vicinity, Slater extracted a linen sac out of his backpack and went snake-hunting.



**A WHITE, TIGHT SHIRT RIPPED** around Talha's biceps; he stood in front of his people, glorified with the morning sun. At that moment, he didn't look like a mafia boss. He didn't look like someone Slater would want to call Master at all. Young, too young, Talha held a quiver of black arrows in his hand. His voice too loud in the morning serenity as he explained the rules.

“Salik will be given two hours headstart before the chase begins. While we wait, you are welcome to use the archery targets to refresh your skills.” With the quiver, Talha pointed toward the archery stands lined up against the house. “Before the hunt begins, you will pick colors for your arrows. Each arrow hitting Salik's body will bring you ten thousand Euros. Please remember, that any lost arrow is a potential weapon for Salik. You aren't allowed to use firearms, but in close combat, you can use knives. If you separate from the group supervised by one of the juries and manage to wound Salik, you are obligated to use a signal gun to summon a juror to confirm the shot. I repeat, you aren't allowed to aim at vital organs.

To receive the reward, you must summon a juror. You aren't allowed to pull the arrow out of the wound until a member of the jury arrives.

“Rüzgar, Abdullah, Ismail, Burak, and Deniz are the jury. Please, step forward.” Five men separated from the crowd. “They are here to keep the hunt fair for everyone.”

Slater stopped listening, watching Dinçer saddle two horses. While Talha explained the remaining rules, Dinçer brought Salik to the yard, then thrust him up on one animal. Taking the remaining horse, they galloped west, disappearing in the woods.

Slater's chest heated with anticipation, he hooked the hissing sack with a long stick and rushed after the horses.



**ONE HOUR LATER,** when Dinçer abandoned the kneeling Salik in the middle of a small forest glade, Slater glanced at the sun. It froze between the forest and zenith, and Slater thought that it must be around ten AM.

Following Dinçer's instruction, Salik counted to sixty before he removed his blindfold. His upper lip curled as he squinted at his surroundings, at the sky, then down at his khaki pants. Getting to his feet, he rushed west.

Entering the glade, Slater hummed as he examined the tracks. Trampled down grass was quickly recovering, suggesting that the trail would disappear within twenty minutes. Following Salik, he jogged to the outskirts where grass thinned out and discovered a clear footprint. Without thinking, he stepped over the print and pressed. Removing his foot, he squatted. The sole of his boot, a fraction bigger than Salik's, crushed the original print, but his experienced eye picked up the outlines of two feet. Still, it was better than nothing.

"Let's make the odds even, shall we, Master?" Stomping as hard as he could, Slater rushed in the opposite direction. Reaching the stream, he followed it down for a mile, before returning to the glade to start over again, but this time going north.

By the time the sun reached its zenith, Slater returned to the glade, happy with the result. About a dozen trails led from here in every direction; and he hoped that his efforts were enough to confuse Talha's people, at least for an hour. Picking up Salik's footprints, Slater followed him step by step, making sure he reprinted the trail with the texture of his military boots.



**NEXT TIME HE SAW** a small group of Talha's people, the sun had traveled over the sky for another twenty degrees. Five men. Slater recognized their faces, but he couldn't remember their names.



At any other time, the group wouldn't catch his interest as Talha wasn't in it, but the horses trotted through the forest following Salik's trail. According to Slater's estimation, if they kept going, they would catch up with Salik within twenty minutes.

The familiar throbbing sensation settled in his fingertips, urging him to touch the comforting coolness of a knife. He could already imagine the beauty of the scene with so much blood in it that the green moss would turn red. He could stick their heads on spikes, draw some meaningless symbols on the ground, maybe even fill their stomachs with snakes, to add to the picture. His head filled with imaginary screams of terror, sending a rush of endorphins down his spine. His fingers curled and a warm throwing needle fell into the crook of his palm.

The seconds ticked, yet he didn't throw the needle.

*'Do I need to explain what would happen if one of my men dies?'* the ice of Talha's words cooled him down. Reluctantly, Slater inserted the needle into the sheath and clicked his tongue.

"Nah-nah-nah, not so fast. I can't kill you yet, but... What fun would it be if the game is this easy?" Fetching a simple Y-shaped stick out of his backpack, he picked a stone, aimed, and struck the leading stallion under the tail. The horse reared, kicked the second-in-chain horse in the muzzle, before throwing the rider off and galloping away. Slater hoped that the noise created would be enough to reach Salik and speed him up or, at least, make him more careful.

Messing with tracks, he kept breaking branches and leaving misleading footprints in obvious places, making Talha's people bump into each other over and over.

At some point, he spotted a wasp hive which he cut off a tree along with the branch. Earning a few stings, he carefully mined the buzzing 'bomb' on a path of one group before retreating.

A poor horse, stomping on it, freed the angry swarm. Even from seventy feet away he could see the black swarm rushing from one man to another, cocooning the riders and the horses. Chin resting on his fists, Slater observed the panic evolve into bedlam, and people galloping in every direction. Losing his interest in the deserted scene, Slater jogged into the woods.



**DESPITE HIS EFFORTS**, stupid Salik was a hair's breadth of being captured at least twice during the day. The idiot made too much mess and was too loud. Slater considered killing him, but his curiosity to see a real, one on one hunt overpowered. Whenever the distance between Salik and the hunters reduced, Slater had to drag attention to himself. It was troublesome, tiring.

By the end of the first day, the number of people capable of continuing the hunt shrunk to thirteen. Night fell, merging the groups for camping, and once again, despite his efforts, they picked up Salik's trail. Such a huge group was complicated to approach. Slater caught himself thinking that murdering them would be easier now when they were all snuggled around the fire.

Splitting them without causing serious damage was troublesome, but Slater still wavered. Despite the irritation Talha caused, there was something about the man that attracted him. Slater wasn't sure if it was his patience, or the way he took care of people around him, or something else. Whatever it was, it didn't let him break the last link.

The smell of food permeated the air. His stomach grumbled; mouth watered from the aroma of grilled meat. He would have killed for a piece of warm, juicy, red steak. Slater looked around. He could have eaten lizards, and he had snakes too, but the raw meat didn't

appeal. Setting up a fire would certainly attract attention on such a clear night. Giving a hateful glare to the people around the fire, he plucked a pack of caramelized nuts out of his backpack and stuffed his cheeks.

When the night progressed, the people had prepared the horses for the night and put up tents, Slater ghosted toward Salik. Never encountering anyone during the day, the man slept propped up against a tree, making Slater wonder if the lack of a proper chase bloated his ego to the point where he'd stopped treating Talha's people seriously. If he was the chased one, he wouldn't be sleeping at all.

*Toothless needs some lessons and exercise.* Slater smirked. Arrogance was one of his favorite human traits, yet, Salik's arrogance didn't excite him. *Tomorrow, I'll make you sweat like a pig.*

Working on a plan, Slater returned to the camp. The snakes in the sack were troublesome. They hissed, they bit, and he had to use a long stick to carry the sack around. Wanting to get rid of them as soon as possible, he clambered up in a tree to watch.

The glowing orange light, coming from the fire, now barely reached the outskirts of the glade. The round hills of the tents created enough of shadows and blind spots for him to kill everyone without anyone noticing.

Talha's people were careless. If Slater was the hunted one, they all would have already been dead, and the night guards Talha put on the first shift wouldn't have saved them.

Two hours later, Slater noticed a pattern. Two of the night guards used the same place as a toilet. That gave him an idea. Jumping down, he darted toward the camp.

Digging a quick hole in the ground on the way to the toilet, he imprisoned common vipers in it, using a net of branches as a grate; strong enough to keep the snakes inside but still flimsy enough to break under human weight.

The result came quickly. A howl of pain and terror was music to Slater's ears. Perching on a branch of a massive pine tree, he surveyed the camp in small detail. Unfamiliar with the poor bugger who stepped on his trap, he didn't feel guilty for sending one of the walī of the slain home.

Precise and quick, the instructions left Talha's mouth, ordering two members of the jury to escort the wounded man to the lodge, treat the bites, and give him a common viper antidote.

Talha's face was a plaster mask in the bluish light of his flashlight when he returned to the trap to inspect it. Slater fidgeted watching him chase away the remaining snakes with a long stick. When Master picked a twig used to keep snakes inside, his eyes narrowed. A pad of his thumb ran over the cut, and Slater instantly understood what he saw—a clean cut, made with a knife. Dropping the twig, Master pressed his fingers to a clear footprint in the dirt, as if the touch could tell him a tale. His face darkening with every second.

*Ah, Slater was careless... Master isn't stupid, after all.*

Heart leaping into his throat, Slater swallowed, trying to rule out the unfamiliar agitation from his chest, as he observed Talha's every move. When the man scattered the remaining twigs aside, Slater's nails dug into the trunk next to him. A piece of rind broke off under his grip, and the tree bled with pine sap that instantly jammed his fingers. Slater didn't pay attention.

Wide back arching, Talha loomed over the hole, examining it. Pressing his fingers to the side slope where Slater's karambit plowed the ground, Talha leaned closer. In the stripping light of his flashlight, his long fingers caressed the ground. Slater gulped, imagining the featherlike touch on his skin as Talha studied his every scar. Somehow, in the night, surrounded by a smell of pine, the moment felt more intimate than the sex they'd had. The embryonic arousal twitched in his belly, awakening his thirst.

With an angry exhale, Talha straightened, and Slater itched to crawl closer to smell his emotions. To taste that beautiful fury that twisted Master's face and learn its unique tang.

Talha squinted in the dark, his eyes x-raying the thick green foliage as if expecting to find someone. For a second, their gazes linked, and Slater recoiled despite knowing that no human eye could see him right now. His heart violent in his chest, every beat hurt. Unable to blink, he gawked back. He couldn't see Talha's eyes, but he knew they were brimming with liquid amber. Without thinking, he collected the pine sap and hoisted his hand to his eyes. In the moonlight, it glinted with the color of Talha's eyes.

That was confusing. Never in his life had he felt like this. No human being ever caused his pulse to speed up, unless during sex.

This was new, and he wanted more of this crazy, painful sensation that made him feel like dying and killing simultaneously. At that moment, Slater wished for the world to disappear, so only Master and Slater remained. So Master would keep looking at him like this, but Master turned away.

Two hours later, the camp quieted again, allowing Slater to climb down the tree. Needing only four hours to sleep, he had the whole night to prepare for the morning, but before that, he yearned to see Talha.

After the incident, the guards took their duties with decent diligence. Still, Slater didn't have problems crawling into Talha's tent. Suffused with Master's scent, it made him freeze and suck the air in through his nose. The mix of leather and bitter almond made his head spin. None of his previous masters smelled this good. They reeked of expensive perfume that concealed the sour stench of sweat. On the contrary, Master used oils that only accented the clean scent of his skin. Even after riding the whole day, he smelled good. Crawling toward him, Slater stole another sniff, his nose almost brushing against Talha's neck.

Slater's body heated up. Master was beautiful in his untroubled sleep. With one hand tossed behind his head, he slept on a mat, fully clothed. A part of Slater was anxious to curl by his side and spend the night in the tent, guarding him. The other one wanted to drive a needle in the soft spot under his chin for leaving him behind, for ignoring him.

Instead, he pressed his fingers to Talha's lips. Dry and hot, they felt rough under his pads. His heart sped up as he outlined the unshaven chin and drew a line down Talha's long neck until his index finger stopped at the notch.

"You belong to me, Master. Don't forget it," he whispered, got up, and stole out of the tent, another idea forming in his mind.

Stealing a tent from a sleeping person was the funniest and easiest part of setting the stinging, living trap.



**“FUCKING HELL! I’ll kill this son of a bitch!”** A yell full of pain cut through the air.

Slater giggled. A massive branch beneath him vibrated as he threw a piece of orange nougat into his mouth, watching two men roll on the ground, shouting and cursing. Messing with Talha’s people was almost as fun as killing.

Fire ants were the bitch. His arms, red and irritated, burned. Scratching them every ten seconds, Slater didn’t regret the pain, as the plan worked beautifully. Relocating a huge anthill was harder than he’d imagined, and his whole body still itched, feeling the crawls of a million little legs, but the result was worth every sting. A simple tripwire trap released the tent that he sprawled between two trees, showering the men with angry ants and the remains of their ruined colony. Succumbing to panic, one man jumped to his feet and rushed toward the horses, the other clawed his clothes to pieces. Getting himself naked, he kept rolling over the ground, and Slater couldn’t tell if he was shaking the ants off or gathering them.

The group of horses, joining the madness, neighed and reared, creating beautiful chaos.

When the other victim of the attack squalled, scratching his naked, swelling body, Slater hummed. He didn’t expect such an

acute allergic reaction, but that worked even better. There was no way the man could ride in such a state, it meant someone would have to bring him back to civilization and simple medical assistance.

“Eight...” Slater counted, watching his forecast coming to life. The former ardor disappeared. Anger and panic curdled the air. So potent, Slater basked in the smell. Sometimes, the wind brought him shreds of conversations. Just like now.

“Talha, I don’t get it. It’s like... he is toying with us,” Ejder jabbered, grasping Talha’s forearm. “He was in the camp; he stole the tent and no one saw him. He could have killed us all. Why didn’t he?”

“Calm down...” Talha gnashed out. Grabbing Ejder’s shoulders, he shoved his brother toward Dinçer. When he spoke, he didn’t look at Ejder. “From now on, I’m going alone. Keep him safe.”

“Like hell, I’ll let you! I’m coming with you!” Ejder protested, his chin flying high in defiance.

Talha ignored him, his eyes locked with Dinçer’s. “If something happens to him...”

“You don’t have to worry, Reis.”

Talha picked up his bow. Slater jumped down the tree, grabbed his backpack, and sprinted toward Salik.



**SALIK'S GREASY HAIR GLOWED** in the midday sun as he fought his way through the bushes. His panting so loud, that Slater heard it from two hundred feet away. His face bled. Cut with stray branches, it attracted the attention of horseflies and mosquitoes. The dark swarm surrounded him like a cloak, causing his hands to flap around in powerless, meaningless fury.

Watching him fight the forest, instead of gliding through it, Slater once again realized how weak and unskilled city men were. Left without technology and the bubble wrap civilization provided, they were vulnerable, useless. Some were better than Salik, still, Slater was bored. Among them all, he couldn't find a decent competitor.

Even Talha had disappointed. He didn't look like he had been interested in the hunt at all. More than often, he let Ejder make decisions about the directions, and corrected him only when their route strayed too much from Salik's. A few times Slater saw him teach Ejder how to read the path, so Slater knew Talha could see where Salik had gone. Yet, he never used the knowledge. Slater couldn't understand why.

At some point, Slater started thinking that maybe, once again, he was looking in the wrong place and instead of a master he should be looking for an enemy. A strong, smart, cruel, yet dominant



enemy. Someone who had been born to entertain Slater, oppose him, maybe even break him. Imagining such an enemy, Slater shivered with anticipation. He wouldn't mind if someone like this broke him.

Daydreaming, he startled, as an arrow cut the air and plunged into the dead pine tree, shards of rotten bark spattering from the impact point. The flight of the arrow was black.

*So Master could be fast, after all... He is only fifteen minutes behind.* Slater wasn't sure if that made him happy or disappointed. He didn't hear Talha approach, which surprised him, but he hoped to have more time to play with Salik before anyone managed to find him. His vision focused on the foliage, reading small, tale-telling oscillations.

Salik yelped, bending to the ground, he rushed north, where the bushes were thicker and the ground muddier.

Sinking into the shadows, Slater watched Master slither through wind-fallen trees. Jumping over a stump, Talha ducked below a net of fallen trees. His hand caught twigs, bending them away and releasing them as he passed. Horseless, with a bow in one hand and a quiver behind his back, Talha sent another arrow after the fugitive. With a swish, it once again hit a tree.

*Huh? Master missed again. Master is sloppy.*

Talha picked up the tempo, as his movements became less precise. Sending one arrow after another, he collected them on his way, as he chased after Salik forcing him to speed up. The first thought about Master being a lousy archer crumbled to dust when a pattern formed. Every arrow hit a mere inch away from Salik, impelling him to run in a certain direction. The longer Slater watched, the more it resembled a game, a hare chase.

Cascades of sweat rushed down Salik's red face, he slurred something under his shallow breath. Meanwhile, Talha's white shirt remained dry, nearly perfect. Entranced in smooth movements of Talha's body, Slater couldn't stop ogling his trapezius muscles bulge with every pull of the bowstring.

Holding his bow above his head, Talha froze, and Slater's heart halted. He didn't dare to blink, scared to miss something.

"I wanted to give you more time and the grieving families the opportunity to earn on your death, but it looks like the devil is on your side, for now. You have one hour, Salik," Talha said in such a cold, emotionless voice that Slater's skin crawled. He wanted Master

to talk like this to him. In bed. To feel the cage of his impelling hands on his throat. To enjoy Master's cock in his ass. The warmth of arousal flushed through his body.

Talha blew the air out of his lungs and released the arrow. Twirling in the air, the tip caught the running man's earlobe.

“One hour, Salik. Then I'm coming for you.”



**A BRANCH THROBBED** beneath him in beat with his heart, increasing his nervousness. A wide trunk of a forked tree guarded his back, Slater fidgeted. He had been sprinting to get ahead of Salik for the last thirty minutes, and now his sweat attracted all kinds of insects. According to his predictions, Salik should have passed him seven minutes ago, yet, he couldn't even hear him.

He was about to jump down when the sound of breaking wood spiked his senses. Every muscle tense, Slater froze, listening.

Heavy panting, curses that were barely above the whisperer, and the stench. A sour, greasy stench of fear and unwashed body.

His hand, moving behind his back, found a sheath tucked under his backpack. The corrugated grip perfect in his hand, Slater drew his combat knife out. He didn't use it often, giving preference

to his karambits, yet it was a good, reliable weapon. Custom made and perfectly balanced it was adjusted to his palm.

Flipping the blade around his fingers, Slater waited for Salik to approach before he sent the knife down. The blade sliced through the ground, sticking halt-deep and an inch away from the tip of Salik's boot. The man flinched and jumped aside. The black beads of his eyes shooting a feral glance up as his upper lip curled, revealing the black gape where his teeth should have been.

“Y-you?”

The sounds of his pitched voice made Slater cringe inwardly. Bringing his index finger to his lips, he hushed, “Shhhh.”

Salik dropped his focus to the weapon, and Slater hopped to another branch, then to the next one, before escaping into the shadows of the forest.



**HIS SUGARY FINGERS FROZE** halfway to his mouth, holding a piece of mint rahat locum. He watched Salik's scrawny frame rise from the mud behind Talha; a knife squeezed in his fist blade up was a perfect continuation of his hand. The stench, coming from his body, faded and even the swarm of midges that used to give away his location now lost their interest in him.

In disappointment, Slater almost dropped his sugary treat as Talha stood oblivious to the world. Engrossed in reading tracks, he didn't notice the barefoot Salik creeping toward him.

*Too bad, Master, it was fun. I guess this is how our contract ends...* Indifference drained his heart from the weird agitation he had been feeling since Talha's eyes linked with his in the night. Losing his interest in Talha altogether, Slater spat the now unfit, sweet taste of locum. *Slater chose wrongly. Master didn't fit. Too young, too careless. Who should Slater approach next?*

He was about to hop off the branch, when the bloodthirsty blade cut the air, spraying mud over Talha's white shirt. In the last second, Talha ducked under Salik's hand and elbowed the man in his stomach. The now useless bow slipped from his shoulder and hung on his forearm. Talha cast it aside.

The dirt splashing under Salik's foot, he stabbed forward, aiming at Talha's stomach. Forced to retreat, Talha shook off the quiver and tossed it close to the bow.

"Drop your knife, and for the sake of old friendship I'll kill you fast and painless. Fight me, and I'll feed your liver to ants," Talha's voice, so soft and calm, demanded attention. "You can recite the Shahada<sup>[27]</sup> if you want, I'll wait. But this is as far as you go."

"Huh?" Unable to suppress a giggle, Slater licked sugar dust off his fingers, his interest spiking again. Talha looked confident, maybe too confident. Once again, Slater thought that he loved arrogance in people. Unlike Salik's, Master's was delicious. It had that potent, oily scent to it—the scent of the battlefield, overheated metal, and desert.

According to Slater, only a noob would lose against an unarmed opponent, but Master, obviously, had another opinion. Slater wanted to see him in combat to study his skills. In a situation like this, to stand a chance, Master should not only be more skillful but also had to be faster. Salik's stance and the way he held the knife didn't come from any martial art but screamed of jail time. The blade migrated from one hand to another, constantly disappearing in the shadows of his wrists.

Slater caught himself thinking that attacking Salik barehanded was an extremely stupid idea. Slater wouldn't risk it, and there was no way Master was faster or more skillful than Slater. *Maybe only more stupid.*

“ARRRRGGHHH!” Rushing forward in bull-like fury, Salik shoved his left palm up, aiming at Talha’s face, distracting him, his armed hand ready to stab. Talha leaped aside.

“Run, Master, run,” Slater whispered. “There is no victory for you.”

The scrawny man launched again with a series of straight jabs and wide flicks of a knife designed to cut Talha’s forearms. Eyes on his opponent Talha retreated in quick, careful steps, and Slater remembered the first rule of self-defense against a knife fighter: if you can’t see a knife, you have already lost.

Yet, Talha acted like he owned the space. Tearing his shirt off his shoulders, he eliminated the opportunity for Salik to grab his shirt and control the distance between them. Slater nodded his appreciation, when Talha didn’t throw the shirt away, but wrapped it around his left fist and forearm, creating a simple cloth shield. It wouldn’t save him from a stab but might help with slashes.

Slater regretted his inability to come closer. He considered to provide Master with anything for self-defense but refrained. *If Master dies, c’est la vie. Also, if Slater showed himself, Master might start relying on Slater. That won’t be fair, would it?*

Resuming a basic warrior stance, with one foot in front of the other, Salik went for a forward slash, aiming for Talha’s neck. Leaping aside, Talha drove his hand into the top of his boot and drew out a black, curved knife with the prominent sawback and inner curve covered with shark teeth.

Seeing the knife, Salik shrunk aside. The air of dominance dissolved around him as he pulled off his muddy shirt. Instead of wrapping it around his spare hand he clothed it around his armed one, giving Slater a ‘tell’ that his second hand wasn’t nearly as good as his dominant one, and he was scared that Talha might cut his fingers.

*Interesting.* Slater’s nerves vibrated with elation; his fingers curled around the branch beneath him as he leaned closer to get a better view.

Talha didn’t move, giving the privilege of the first attack to his opponent, except, now Salik wasn’t eager to cut the distance. Moving in small, tentative steps, he kept his eyes glued to Talha’s weapon. Opposing the way Talha held his knife, Salik flicked his blade tooth down.

Slater patted his pocket, looking for the paper bag full of sweets. It rustled under his touch.

Salik's black eyes flickered on his mud-covered face. He hurled, zapping his hand through the air in wide, half-circling movements. With easy grace, Talha bent backward avoiding the first and second swooshes, before ducking beneath Salik's left arm.

Salik spun, and his knife rushed in a high downward diagonal slash, aiming at Talha's unprotected chest. Slater swallowed as the scrawny figure eclipsed his master. Pulse speeding, he fidgeted. His eyes grazed into the blade, watching for signs of blood, then into Talha's shoulder, visible behind Salik's back.

*Did he cut Master? Weirdly nervous, he counted seconds. Why doesn't Master defend himself? Why is Master being useless? C'mon Master, show Slater what you are capable of.*

Salik struck again with a forehand stroke, informing him that it wasn't over. Talha shifted, letting the knife skid along his naked arm but not cutting it. Master's knife flew up and sliced off the bottom part of Salik's earlobe. Blood gushed from the wound, mixing with dirt.

Noticing that Master was unharmed, Slater's lips curled in a prideful smile.

"You can still stop, Earless, before you become Noseless or Eyeless. Accept my mercy. Drop the knife, and I'll end this fast." Talha said, his voice void of emotions, and for a moment, Slater was envious of Salik. The all-consuming desire returned, smoldering him from within. He yearned to spar with Master too, and catch the gaze full of attention on himself, to feel it glide down his body, anticipating his every move.

Despite the rage deforming Salik's face, he didn't rush forward but went for a controlled, clean jab, aiming for Talha's stomach, then snapped his wrist, going for his inner arm and then throat. The quick exchange of blade flares left them moving in small side steps, circling each other.

Backs curled, eyes locked, they circled each other like wild animals fighting for territory. Jealousy took over, as somehow it looked intimate. Slater wondered how hot it would be to fuck after a sparring, with his body throbbing with fresh cuts and bruises. He itched to find out. None of his masters ever sparred with him, and he wondered if Talha would be an exception. He scratched a mosquito bite behind his ear, feeling a growing dissatisfaction as now he hated

how Master looked at Salik. It felt like a waste. Master shouldn't be looking at pigs. Only at him.

One leg forward, Salik's knife zigzagged in the air, making it nearly impossible for Talha to retaliate. Choosing to use microseconds for a counterblow, Talha dodged the knife with his shielded hand as his blade sliced Salik's left forearm.

A step back then a lunge forward, Salik whipped his wounded arm up. The black blood from his slashed arm spurting in Talha's eyes, distracting him for a fraction of a second. He flinched with a blink, and Salik's armed hand dove under Talha's cloth-shield, changed the trajectory, and rushed up.

Slater's breath caught. *Slater was right, Master is stupid after all... How careless.*

Red flaring on Talha's chest he skidded away. Slater's eyes strained. The thin vertical slash that stretched from the bottom of his ribcage up to his left collarbone. The blood didn't gush out; it merely seeped, meaning it was a scratch. Hopping aside, Talha glanced at his chest, then scowled up at Salik.

"I offered you an easy death twice. Now you will die in agony and disgrace." Raising his clothed arm to his chest, Talha flicked the knife left and right, waiting for another attack.

Salik struck down, and Talha dove under his arm. His hand aimed for Salik's Achilles' tendon as he tumbled forward. Mud splashed, as he completed a basic roll and got to his feet. Covered in mud, Talha looked savage, irresistible. Slater wanted to serve him, to wipe his body with a warm cloth, then lick it clean.

Slater clicked his tongue, watching Salik struggle for balance. Blood, mixing with dirt, streamed down his foot. Robbed of mobility and ears, he presented a pitiful picture. Dragging his leg, he tried for a low horizontal slash, but Talha dodged.

The game was over. Salik had already lost, and now Master didn't need to engage, just wear him out. Wait till the bloodloss took its toll and finish the traitor.

Master's stance relaxed, the flicks of his knife became playful, teasing, provoking. Movements almost lazy, he let Salik closer.

Slater didn't approve. After all, people were arrogant and stupid. This meaningless show off could cost Talha his life, yet achieved nothing. Master was careless again, and any clean attack

would now result in a blood-thirsty blade being driven under his ribs.

Lips twitching, Salik roared, trying to stab Talha's eyes with his fingers. His other hand flying forward in a mix of a jab and stab. The metal clanged as Talha dodged and captured Salik's blade with the sawback of his own knife. Shoulder going down, Talha wrung Salik's hand. The knife, wrenched from weakening fingers, landed in the mud.

Moving with impressive speed, Talha painted Salik's chest in red with a few easy strokes. The cut he left under Salik's arm glowed with flooding red. Slater scrunched his face, realizing that Talha severed his tendon as the arm hung loosely. The remaining hand jolted in the air begging for mercy, as Salik mumbled something.

Squeezing the handle in his hand, Talha finished the final attack with a straight punch to Salik's massive nose. Blood bursted out as the man swayed on his feet. Eyes rolling up, he stumbled back before slumping down in the mud.

Talha gushed out the air, raising his eyes to the sky flickering above the thick foliage, before he picked up Salik's knife. Concern hardening his mouth, he gave the weapon a long, scrutinizing look, before tucking it behind his belt.

Running his clothed hand down his bleeding chest, Talha wrestled a signal gun out of the thigh pocket of his cargo pants and fired in the air. After putting it away, he collected his bow and the quiver, grabbed Salik's foot, and hauled him back the way they'd come.

Slater jumped to the ground, his hands shaking with adrenaline when he crawled after his master. About seven minutes later, he caught a glimpse of his naked, mud-covered torso. A motionless body sprawled on the ground by Master's feet.

Huffing with effort, Talha hooked Salik under his arm and seated his motionless form against a tree. Lifting Salik's hands, he pulled a small spool of fishing line out of one of his belt pockets.

Slater couldn't see the transparent cord, but he saw Salik's hands swell with decreasing circulation. Heavy folds formed around the places the cord bit into his flesh, making his pink hands look like tied sausages.



Hunger gnawed at Slater, making him wish Talha would hurry up and finish. He hadn't eaten properly in three days and now was starving.

When Salik's hands were tied, Talha drew out his knife. Pressing the tip beneath Salik's ribs on his right, Talha drove the curved side into the flesh.

Salik convulsed, shrieked, and thrashed against the tree, kicking the ground beneath him as Talha's hand kept digging the blade into the wound. Slater swallowed, watching 'shark teeth' tear through the flesh, coming out crimson. When Master yanked the knife away, a massive, bleeding wound gaped in Salik's stomach.

The ground beneath Salik came to movement, and Talha stepped aside, revealing his victim was seated on a huge anthill. The ruined colony bled out with live black streams that instantly attacked the invader.

"No, Reis, I beg you!" Salik slurred, his feet kicked the anthill which only maddened the giant black ants. "Please."

"I promised to feed your liver to ants. I have to keep to my word, because no one will respect a man who doesn't respect his word. Isn't that right?" Talha wiped the knife against his pants before sheathing it.

"No, Reis, I beg you." Salik's legs beat against the ground in a useless attempt to shake the insects off. Mesmerized, Slater watched Salik's mud-covered body turn black under the living carpet.

"I'm afraid, I can't help you. You betrayed me, yet, I was merciful. I offered you an easy death. Twice. You rejected it. Twice. Now you will die in agony, and ants will feast on your liver." Raising his voice, Talha added, "I don't forgive betrayal. No one can hurt my family and walk away."

Goosebumps erupting, Slater feasted on Talha's emotionless face. *Cold and cruel, Master is so hot.*

"Reis?" someone called, as people cut through the bushes using knives. Two men, then two more. Slater retreated into the shadows, watching them approach Talha and Salik. Someone gagged and turned away.

"Oh my... You okay?" Dinçer cringed, giving Talha's wound a long look of concern, then glanced at Salik, disapproval darkening his face. "Was it necessary?"

Ejder stood behind Talha with his eyes wide as he watched the maddened man writhe in panic. Salik's hoarse panting mixed with squeals as his eyes flared with whites.

Talha stepped away from his victim. Noticing his brother's pallid face, he cupped Ejder's eyes before U-turning him.

"Yes, it is. It's time to set an example. Anyone who harms my family will die a horrifying death. People should remember it well." Glancing over his shoulder, he added, "If you feel sorry for him, you can stay. If he doesn't die by the night, you can finish him."



**SUCCUMBED TO BOILING** magma of awakened emotions, Slater barely registered the road back. He wished for Master to come home sooner, to experience that cold, cruel dispassion directed at him as Master would order him to suck his cock.

The footfalls echoing through the mansion brought his every cell to attention. Controlling his emotions became hard, nearly impossible, yet, he steeled himself. Sprawling on Talha's bed, he kept crunching a long tulumba stick. His hand froze halfway to his mouth when the bedroom door flew open.

Disheveled after a long drive, Talha still looked hot. He carried that titillating smell of blood, dirt, and pine.

“The syrup is dripping,” Talha said, placing a dirt-covered bow on a small wooden stand. “Make sure you change the sheets before you get the hell out of my bedroom.”

He took a step toward the bathroom, but stopped, facing the reaper. Expression puzzled and dark, he drew the knife from behind his belt and tossed it on the bed.

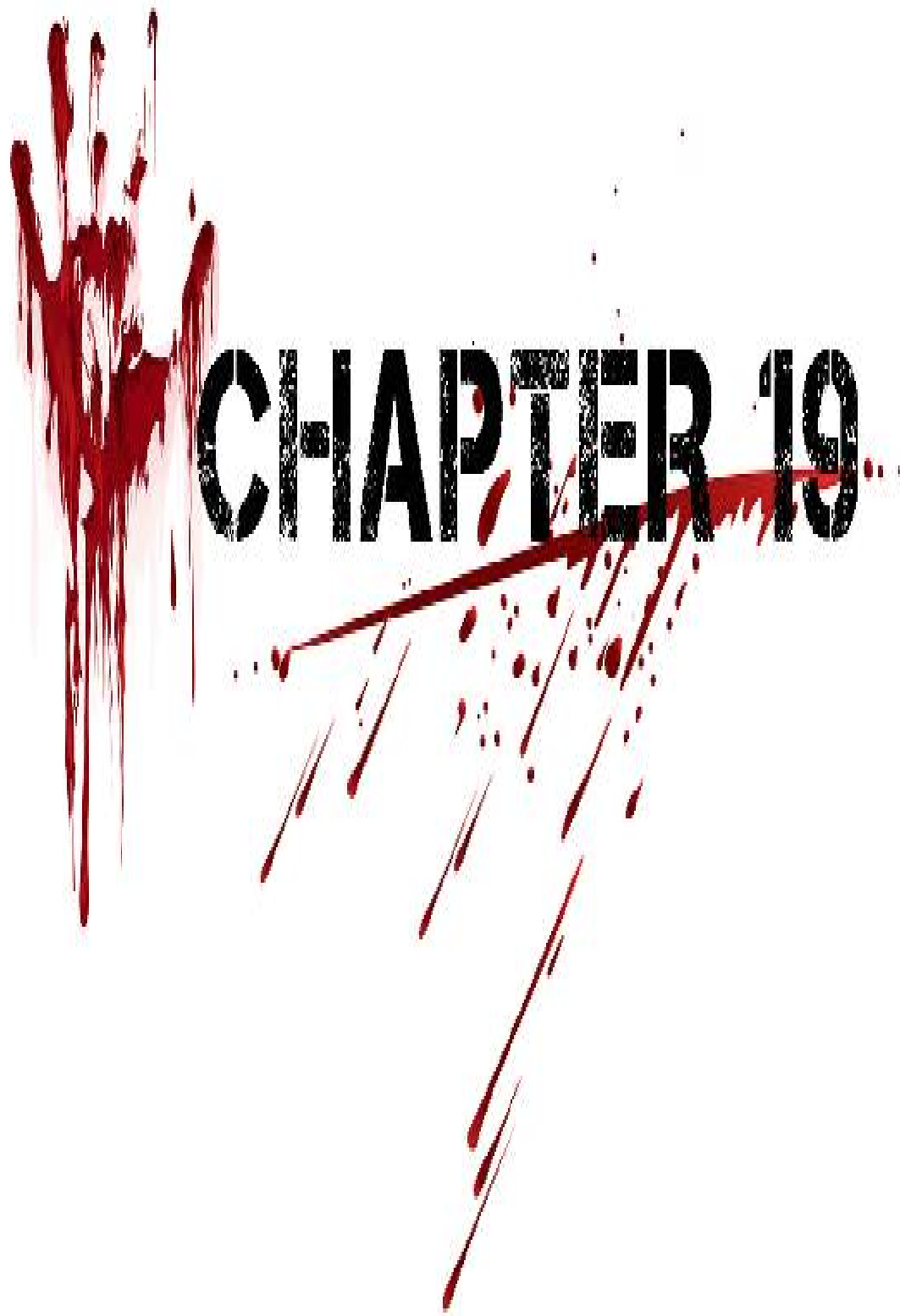
“You left it in the forest.” Slater’s cheek twitched, as a wide grin stretched his face. Lust blazing through him with all-consuming fire.

Talha wavered for a moment before disappearing behind the doors.

“Tonight, Master can’t escape.”



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**PRESENT**

**THE METAL DOOR SCREECHED OPEN**, and Talha faced the noise. Shoulders hunching forward, Slater stumbled through the

threshold. Slapping the wall with his palm, he made a few uncertain steps toward his prisoner before dropping to his knees by Talha's side. The stench of blood and death preceding the airwave, making Talha hold his breath. In the dark, he couldn't make out Slater's face but the frequent flashes, breaking in from the outside, outlined his silhouette.

"Is Master cold?" Talha's heart sank from the sounds of the low, barely above a whisper voice. "Slater is cold. Chest hurts... Why does it hurt so bad, Master? Slater killed, but there was no pleasure. Is Slater broken? Is this why Master threw Slater away? Because Master knew it?"

*Fuck...* Every word, aggravating by the dull, listless intonation, pierced Talha's chest with a needle of frost. The air whizzed leaving his lungs as he smacked his head against the ground and squeezed his eyes. He'd never seen Slater this broken. He'd never heard such despair in his voice, and now, lying on the floor, he was powerless to fix it.

Slater didn't wait for his reply. Dropping down, he nested his head at the crook of Talha's shoulder, his sweaty forehead brushed against his skin scalding it with incandescent heat and freezing ice. Snuggling up to Talha's side, the ripper wrapped his arm around his torso, and Slater's stomach pressed against his side. Talha's breath hitched, as Slater's wet shirt clung to his skin.

Mind paralyzed with fear, he concentrated on the sensation. A part of Slater's shirt stuck to his body above his hip. It was hotter than the rest. His pulse spiked as he felt a hot trickle snake down his hip.

"Ught-ugh!" Pushing the order into the name, Talha called, demanding attention.

"It's okay, Master." A sultry whisper washed over Talha's neck. "Master won. Master can have everyone. Slater will go nowhere. Slater belongs to Master, so does Hanım. Slater will forever guard you and your Mistress. Even in Hell."

Slater's fingers sank into small grooves between Talha's ribs, slid up his chest, trailed up to his face. Sticky and wet, they outlined his jaw, brushed over the stripe of the tape.

"Slater was weak. Slater was scared to hear Master's voice, but it doesn't matter anymore." He picked up a corner of the duct tape and tore it off.

Talha hissed. His mouth and the skin around it burned. He moved his lips to one side, then to another, before he croaked, “Slater, untie me now!”

“Don’t, Master.” Slater’s low, liquid voice dripped with a hidden warning. “It’s no use. It’s too late.”

“Slater!” Talha growled, but the blood smelling fingers pressed to his mouth, hushing him.

“Master, stop, or I’ll gag you again.” His cold nose brushed against Talha’s neck. “Talk to me... Slater is cold.”

“You are bleeding. You need a doctor.”

The ripper jerked his head. “Slater has always wondered; why did Master kiss Slater when Master thought Slater was asleep? Tell me, Master.”

“Release me, and I’ll tell you.”

Slater’s body shook with the silent laughter. “Master is funny. Slater isn’t stupid. Master will leave Slater as soon as Master is free. Then Slater will be alone in Hell. Only Slater and Hanım. How fair would it be, Master? You can’t send Iblīs to the Hell of your broken toys, Master, if you aren’t ready to follow.”

“I won’t leave you.”

“Master liesssss.” The snake-like hissing escaped Slater’s mouth. His fingers sank into Talha’s ribs. “Don’t insult Slater with liesssss.”

Taken aback, Talha swallowed the filthy taste in his mouth, considering what to say next. “Indulge me first, Slater. Tell me, why Behçet never used you against me.”

“Simple, Master. Slater didn’t want to kill for Behçet anymore.”

Talha frowned. “Why?”

“Behçet was relying on Iblīs too much. Behçet forgot how to be strong. Slater tried to remind him. But once weak is forever weak, Master. Weak should die. Slater is weak. Slater should die. Slater thought Master is weak, that Master loves Slater. Slater was wrong. Slater thought Master loves Hanım. Slater was wrong again. Slater isn’t very smart, after all. Master is strong. Master loves no one.”

Talha’s heart shrunk as he listened to Slater’s listless voice. He raised his head to have a better look at the face, drowning in the

darkness, but the decreasing flashes weren't enough to illuminate anything, but the contour of his head. "Slater..."

"Shut up, Master. Enough. Slater doesn't want to hear a lie. Slater doesn't want to be insulted. Master will say anything to live. Don't... It doesn't matter anymore. Slater will kill Master when Slater can't go on."

"Slater, I..."

"Silence, Master. Slater is tired. Slater wants to sleep. Say another word and I will gag you again."

Talha's heart drummed in his chest as the hot liquid dripped a small pool beneath his back. He waited a few minutes before nudging Slater with his hip. Slater didn't move.

Licking his lips, Talha rolled to his side. The chamber lightened a fraction, as the dull gray light crawled in, and soon enough he was able to recognize the pale face, glistening with perspiration, half-opened mouth, closed eyes, and chest rising and falling in deep, rhythmical breaths.

Talha's gaze darted all over Slater's body, making out his wrist straps and military boots.

*I need to move him...*

He wasn't sure he could position Slater's body high enough for his fingers to reach the karambit or a throwing knife, but he could roll Slater's arm high enough for him to grab a throwing needle. As soon as the idea formed, he chased it away. He'd spent what felt like hours rubbing the rope against the floor but caused no damage. Stabbing it would not result in an immediate release.

Biting his lower lip, Talha inched his hips up and left, moving Slater's body toward his tied up arm. Slater didn't flinch, and he repeated the process. Slowly, inch by inch he pushed his lower body up, completing a forty-five-degree angle. When Slater's back thrust against his arm, Talha stretched the ropes and extended his fingers. Swallowing, he traced up the tactical belt, looking for the sheath. The limits of the bonds, when his middle finger hooked a metal ring of the knife handle. Pushing out a long, controlled exhale, Talha tugged the karambit out of the sheath. Flipping it around his fingers, he gripped the handle and glided the edge against the rope. The evil grip tightened around his wrist, as the bonds bit into his skin. The blade nibbled at the rope, slowly gnawing its way through



it, and Talha realized that Slater must have used a durable climbing rope to tie him.

Working his wrist up and down, he felt the rope vibrate, tighten, and tear. Every muscle shrieked with intensified circulation as he slowly lifted his upper body. The blood, slamming into his head plunged the room into darkness and forced him to slap the ground with his palm. His spine cracked as Slater's head rolled off his shoulder and bumped against the ground. The younger man flinched, sat up, and his muddy gaze fixed on Talha.

Talha's heart leaped to his throat as Slater's confused look traveled down his hand and fixed on the knife.

"Huh... Master is free." A cruel smile stretched the left side of Slater's mouth, and his face darkened.

Biting the inside of his cheek, Talha put the knife to the ground and backhanded Slater's face with his free hand. "Enough, Slater."

Head whipping to the side, Slater hunched forward but didn't attempt to look up again. Swallowing thick saliva, Talha picked up the karambit, flipped it in his hand, and offered it to Slater handle forward.

"Release me. Now."

Slater chuckled. Head rolling to the side, he granted Talha a hard stare. "Master is strong. Slater is weak. Master can do what Slater can't. Strong should live."

Getting onto his knees, Slater took the knife and cut the other rope, before sitting back on his heels. His gaze glued to an invisible spot on the floor. He didn't raise his eyes even when Talha got to his feet and strolled down the chamber.

"Where are my clothes?"

"Next room." The dull answer drowned in the darkness.

Slamming the door open, Talha entered the vast, almost empty room, and for the first time in what felt like forever, he didn't smell the suffocating stench of decay. A dim electric lamp hung above the door, the light barely strong enough to recognize the dirty red color of the walls. Another door drowned in the gloom at the opposite wall. Approaching the corner, he grabbed his cock and, aiming at the wall, let go. His aching bladder, releasing, sent a rush of endorphins down his spine. His head fell backward as relief

washed over. Shaking the drops off the tip, Talha examined his surroundings. Carefully folded, his clothes lay on a stool that stood by the right wall, close to the door. Picking up his pants, he quickly tugged them on and hurried back to the chamber.

Slater lay on the floor on the same spot where Talha had been lying five minutes ago. His fingers drew small circles at the ground.

“Get up,” Talha ordered.

“Leave, Master...” Slater croaked. “Leave before Slater changes his mind. Slater won’t follow you anymore. Slater will stay here.”

Swallowing the rising anger, Talha sucked in a deep breath, then blew out the air of irritation. His gaze landed on Camilla’s head. How fast death took away her beauty, covering her smooth skin with green spots. How fast her eyes lost their color. Grabbing Slater’s backpack, Talha picked up Camilla’s arm, then stumbled toward her head. Dropping on his knees, he touched her icy cheeks but a strong hand seized his forearm.

“No, Master. Leave her. Hanım stays with Slater. Slater will guard her sleep. Slater will share her fate.” Staining Talha’s soul with his listless, muddy gaze, Slater released his wrist and rested his head against the ground. “Hanım is broken, so is Slater. We don’t belong up there. Master doesn’t need broken things. But when Master breaks someone else, Master can bring them here, to the graveyard of his broken toys. Now, leave, Master. We will be waiting for you in Hell.”

Talha’s fists itched to smash this face bloody, but he had no time for it. Leashing his anger, he ordered, “Get up.”

When Slater didn’t waver, Talha carefully took Camilla’s head in his hands and put it in the backpack. Hooking it over his shoulders, he grabbed the front of Slater’s shirt.

“Get the fuck up!”

“No... Slater doesn’t want to.”

“Get up!” Jerking Slater’s shirt, Talha pushed the words through gritted teeth, then backhanded Slater’s face.

“Master is funny. So selfish...” Slater grinned. The angry glow lit up his eyes; he hissed, “Leave now, Master, or I will get mad.”

“Then get mad, because I’m fucking furious,” Talha said, wanting to smash this beautiful face against the floor. Anger, confusion, relief, desperation—everything mixed, shuffling white and black. He was furious at Slater for raping him, for slaughtering everyone in his house, for kicking the shit out of him, for locking him down here for days. He was mad at Slater for never saying anything about his feelings and angry at himself for never noticing Slater’s distress. He was so mad, that he wasn’t even sure he was mad at all or just tired. “Don’t even dream about dying here in peace after what you have done. I’ll be the one to decide when and how you will die, and trust me, it won’t be merciful.”

Without thinking, he hauled Slater’s upper body toward himself and collided his lips with Slater’s. Unable to control his emotions, he sank his teeth into the full bottom lip, and the metallic taste bloomed on his tongue. Talha withdrew, leaving the reaper blinking in confusion. He couldn’t remember ever being this pissed in his life. He needed Slater to get furious too, it only seemed fair. He wanted to see a cruel grin and hear words full of hatred, so he could hit his beautiful face, but instead, Slater’s lips quivered. The reaper lowered his chin, trying to glue a smile to his face, but it constantly slipped off.

“Master is so cruel.”

Talha’s chest contracted, and unsettling emotions stormed through his core, seeking a way out.

“Whatever. Get up.” Talha got to his feet and tugged Slater upright. An arm wound around his torso, tugging him somewhere. Slater stumbled, swayed, and leaned forward with all his weight, resting his sweaty forehead in the crook of Talha’s neck.

“So many flies... Funny... Is that because Slater is rotting? Did they come to feast?” Talha frowned, unsure what Slater was talking about. A weak voice seared his neck, “Slater can’t feel his legs...”

“Put pressure on your wound! Where is your fucking car?”

“So many flies...”



**TALHA BARELY REGISTERED DRAGGING SLATER** down the red stone corridor, pushing the metal door open, and stumbling outside. The rising sun perforated dense clouds, showering the Earth in pink light. But even this grayish morning was too much for eyes used to darkness. It took a minute before his vision adapted and he could look around. A net of mist hung in the air, clinging to his face. A red stone minaret pierced a pink cloud, casting a thick shadow over the overgrown, desolated backyard. Through the broken windows of the old, abandoned mosque, Talha saw a white ceiling and a tapered square column. The powerful form of the once magnificent building was painfully familiar to Talha's exhausted mind.

Turning his back to the mosque, he spotted Slater's black Honda CR-V hiding in the shadows of currant bushes. Slapping through the debris toward it, he didn't pay attention to the wet ground, the sharp stones stabbing his soles, or the piece of old wire that caught his pants. All he could think about was the drenched shirt and hot liquid oozing from under his fingers. Slater's pain threshold had always been high. Never before, even when seriously wounded, had Talha seen him this pale, this immobile. Slater's legs barely moved. His eyes dimmed, and his heavy eyelids half-swallowed his unfocused pupils.

Pulling the rear passenger door open, Talha shoved Slater in the rear seat. He didn't register how he got into the car and started the engine, but he remembered how his hands shook when he drove out of the desolate backyard. Racing through the morning city, he constantly checked the rearview mirror to see blood pooling on the beige leather seat. Every time he took a left turn, a small wave of blood ran over the cushion and dropped to the carpet.

Slamming the brake with his foot, he parked before the main entrance of the private hospital. Getting out of the car, he opened the rear door, and grabbing Slater's icy hand, pulled the ripper outside and into his arms. Slater's knees buckled, and his body started sinking to the black, dusty asphalt.

Talha grounded his teeth, riled with the lack of strength. The days spent in immobility did their job, and now he felt no stronger than a newly born kitten. Wrapping Slater's arm around his neck, he hauled him toward the main entrance.



**ONE NURSE RUSHED TOWARD** Talha, checking Slater's vitals as another one darted toward the doctors' lounge. A moment later, Miraç emerged.

“Reis, are you okay?”

“Him first,” Talha said, lifting his chin toward Slater’s pale face.

Materializing by Talha’s side, Miraç checked Slater’s eyes then his pulse, before tugging up his wet shirt. “A gurney, now! Prepare the operating room.”

Head spinning, he watched Slater being taken from his arms and placed onto the wheeled stretcher. The world dimmed, and he had to lean against the wall for balance. His mind blanked as exhaustion took over. He wasn’t sure how much time passed before Miraç touched his shoulder.

“Slater?” His heart sped up from the mere thought that Slater might not make it.

“The knife scratched his liver. The laceration is small, but I wish he came sooner. We sewed the cut and drained the blood from his stomach. The burn on his hand was terribly infected; he is lucky he doesn’t have sepsis. We cleaned it and put him on antibiotics. He is in intensive care now, but he isn’t conscious. He’ll live. At least until your brother gets his hands on him.”

Miraç’s voice sounded dull. Talha rubbed his temples with his fingers. The information bounced against his tired brain.

“Reis?” A hand invaded his personal space, waving in front of his face, then grabbed his shoulder. “Reis, come with me, it looks like you need medical attention yourself.”

“I’m okay...” Talha swallowed. “I’m not wounded, but I can’t hear with my left ear and my head is spinning.”

“Come-come.” With his hand wrapped around Talha’s torso, Miraç ushered him in the office.



**THREE HOURS LATER**, propping himself against the wall, opposite to Slater's medical bed, Talha drowned himself in a disgusting multi-vitamin drink and contemplation. A pile of nootropic and sedative drugs stood untouched close to the salmon sandwich wrapped in plastic. Despite spending days in captivity, hunger was the least of his problems. A part of him wanted to follow Miraç's advice and swallow the pills to ease the noise in his head the concussion and perforated eardrum caused, but he didn't want the sedatives to shuffle his thoughts and affect his judgment.

A quick update from Miraç revealed a pitiful picture. Camilla's death split the Hale Family. For now, Ejder managed to avoid the war, writing things off to the confusion and the inability to recreate the whole picture of the massacre. Since Talha had been missing as well, the Hale Family never declared war, but the relationship between two organizations was irrevocably embittered. To add to it, Ejder placed a price on Slater's head.

Refusing to talk to anyone until he decided what to do with Slater, Talha told Miraç to inform Ejder about his whereabouts and physical state. He also passed a message to Dinçer, asking him to bring his clothes. Even after taking a shower and borrowing Miraç's spare suit, Talha couldn't shake off the suffocating stench of decay

that haunted him. He hoped that his own clothes, his scent, would help him shake it off.

“What a mess...” Talha sank his fingers into his hair. His thoughts jumped all over, and the constant tiny noise in his damaged ear kept stirring his headache. He deliberately distanced himself from Slater, so he wouldn’t strangle the wounded reaper in his sleep. Still, his eyes kept searching Slater’s pale arms, covered with healed burns and the bandage, wrapped around his right hand, the net of bluish veins stretching beneath his transparent skin and the endotracheal tube sticking out from his mouth. A part of Talha needed to reach out and touch his skin to make sure it wasn’t deathly-cold, the other one itched to disconnect the machine so the reaper would pass silently.

It was irrational. He understood it, yet he couldn’t help glancing up at the heart monitor to verify that Slater’s pulse remained stable.

After what felt like an eternity, he glanced out of the window. Another sultry, dusty day stood in full bloom, burning color out of the asphalt. Just like the color, he couldn’t stay indecisive forever. A new spike of pain pierced his head making him avert his eyes from the painfully bright landscape. Soon, he would have to face his people and explain what had happened, yet he had no idea what to say.

*The truth? That I couldn’t control my reaper? That Slater was jealous of Camilla and killed her for this stupid reason? That he kept me in a dungeon for days, fucking me, torturing me?*

The thought made his vision throb with red. There was no way he would ever admit it. It would be suicide. No one would respect or fear him again. He could see the faces of his enemies, full of mockery, gossiping in juicy detail that Talha’s male lover slaughtered his bride out of jealousy.

Cold sweat beaded on his nape.

*I should kill him... It’s time to admit that I was never able to control him. He was never completely loyal to me. Only to himself. I liked to think that he belonged to me, but I don’t even know what’s going on in his head.*

The last thought lit a match in the oily pond of his dormant anger. *He raped me. He disgraced me. He murdered people who trusted me, were loyal to me. There is only one way out of this mess—he should die. Even if I don’t kill him, Ejder will never let it go.*



*Me, disconnecting the machine now, would be mercy. So many people died. We lost England, and we are about to have a war with the Hale Family. I can't protect him anymore. I shouldn't protect him anymore. If I stand against my people, I'll drown Turkey in blood. And for what?*

His glare fixed on Slater's immobile frame.

*For a disloyal dog who only wanted to fuck.*

Yet, despite the thoughts, he didn't approach the ventilator, as a single look at Slater's closed eyes reanimated the feverish whisper in his memory. *'Slater isn't stupid. Master will leave Slater as soon as Master is free. Then Slater will be alone in Hell. Only Slater and Hanım.'*

Talha's throat closed with a bitter emotion he didn't have the mental capacity to classify.

"I can't forgive you. It's not the first time you betrayed me, but this is the last one," Talha whispered. "There is a price on your head. Even if I cancel the contract, how many people have figured out your identity? Half of the criminal world of Anatolia wishes to see Iblīs dead. You are a walking target. What you've started is unstoppable. I can't risk Ejder's life and the lives of people who trust me, to save yours. I can't start a war I won't be able to win."

Even while sleeping, Slater's face wore a grim expression, and Talha voiced the unsaid question the reaper would definitely ask if he was awake, "Why did Master promise not to leave Slater? If Master left Slater in the mosque, it would have ended where it started. It would be so much easier—walk away and never look back."

Talha sighed. "Indeed, why? Why can't I leave you? Why can I never give you up? You are such a shitty assassin, Slater. You cause me so many problems... You are so fucking needy, so troublesome."

Talha smirked, remembering the Royal Game and the lousy job Slater had done with covering his tracks when he reprinted Salik's footprints, and how he carelessly used his karambits to dig the snake-trap. How furious Talha became finding a curvy print from a claw-knife on the pit wall.

Back then, he wanted to kill Slater. Despite clearly seeing two pairs of prints—one above the other—he had never informed anyone about Slater's presence. Two reasons had stopped him. First,

he didn't know Slater's agenda. The way he'd chosen to disable Talha's people suggested that he wished no deaths. Talha suspected that it was either payback for leaving him home or yet another test. The second reason was way more serious. Telling people that Iblīs sided with Salik would result in two outcomes. People would panic and run, leaving Salik in the woods; or the game would turn into a bloody, devil-hunting adventure very few would survive. So he'd kept his mouth shut, watching and analyzing until he grew tired of the meaningless chase and screams full of pain. It didn't matter who Slater was. No one was allowed to make a fool of him and his traditions.

Leaving his people behind, Talha had stepped into the woods alone, wondering if this was what Slater wanted. Finding Salik was easy, but he had been surprised that Slater never interrupted his hare chase, even though he gave him enough time to show up. After knocking Salik out and firing the signal gun to inform his people that the Royal Game had ended, he examined the knife Salik had used. His suspicion confirmed. Lacking a manufacturer's mark, the weapon was bespoke. None of his people would carry anything like this, let alone gift it to Salik. The thought irritated even more, as he'd imagined Slater watching the combat from afar, waiting for one of them to die. And to set the example, Talha had delivered a brutal death to Salik so Slater would think twice before betraying him again. Except, back then, he didn't know that to keep Slater in check, he would have to constantly play a meaningless game of domination.

If he had met Slater in the woods, he had no doubts that he would have killed him, but the long road back home provided him with a lot of thinking time.

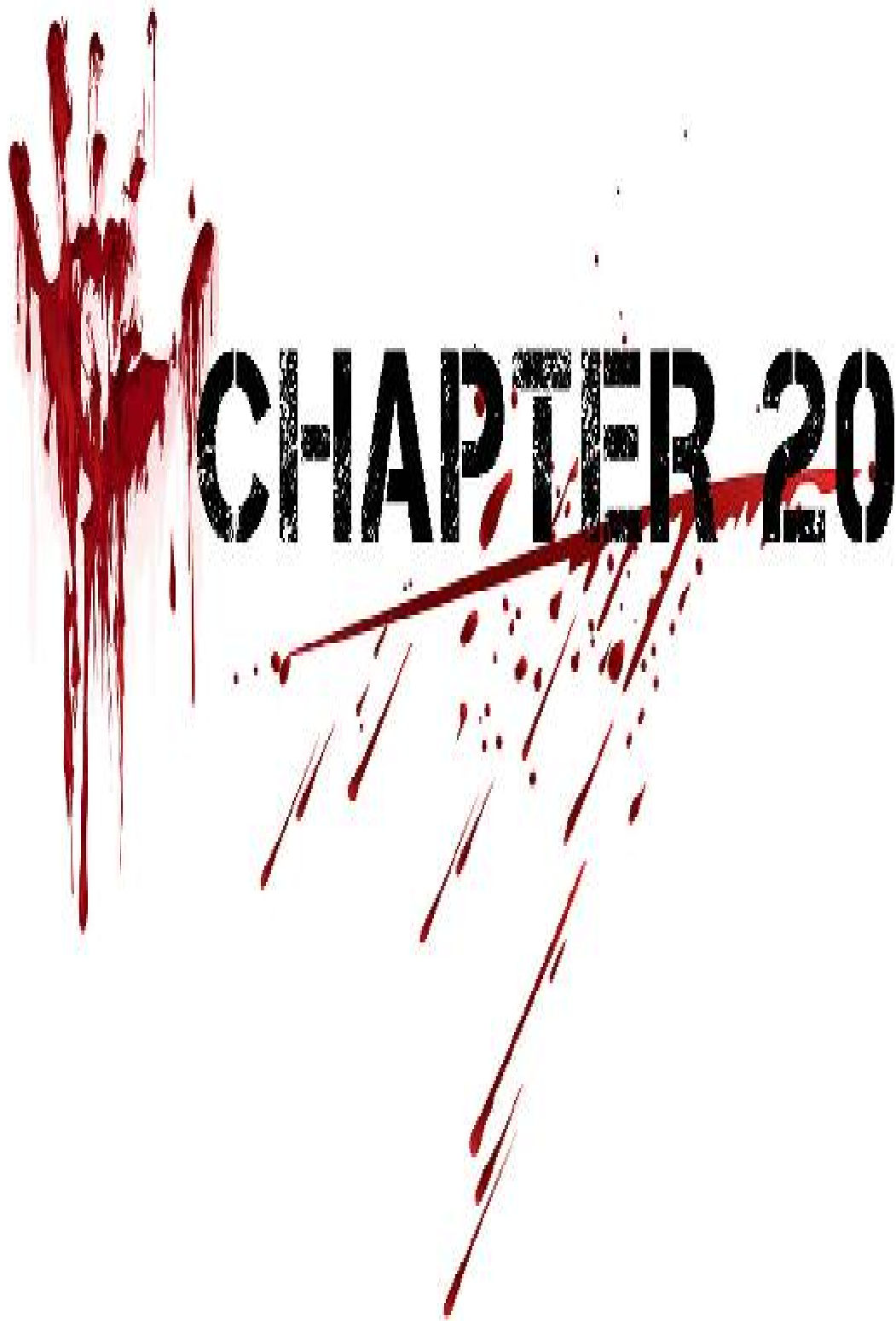
By the time he returned home, his righteousness diminished. The thought that Slater hadn't killed anyone didn't leave his mind, throwing him in a loop of unanswered questions. What did Slater want? Was it another test? If so, did he pass? Or, maybe, it was another sick game?

Talha didn't know.

Slater's combat knife burned his skin when he'd entered his bedroom. He wasn't sure if he should approach the reaper about the topic, but seeing the honey syrup drip from Slater's wrist to his bedsheets, he'd stopped caring. His voice was calm when he'd tossed the knife to Slater and ordered him to change the linens.

Talha shook his head, remembering the blinding smile Slater had granted him that evening as if Talha did exactly what Slater wanted, needed. Brushing his fingers over his lips, Talha sank in the memories of the night Slater came into his bed once again.





**5 YEARS AGO**

**“PLAY WITH ME, MASTER.”** Sweet breath crashed against Talha’s cheek and kicked him out of his sleep better than any slap

could. Hot weight sat astride his abdomen, as vigorous fingers slithered over his bandaged chest. Moving on its own, Talha's palm darted forward and collided with Slater's chest. Glossy and tacky, it slicked under his fingers, making him wonder if Slater smeared himself with oils.

*For better sex? For advantage in a fight? For both?*

Slater leaned closer, raw hunger in his eyes.

Swallowing the first alertness, Talha schooled his features into mild annoyance before slapping the switch with his spare hand. Golden light, coming from the lamp on his left, illuminated Slater's mottled skin. A rash of small red dots spread from his fingers up to his elbows. Noticing a sprinkle of rare white bumps mixed in, Talha assumed these were constantly itchy ant stings. The rest of his body wore bloated clusters of random sized welts, left by other insects.

*Not oils. Ointment. He's itchy.*

"Haven't you played enough in the woods? It looks like you had a lot of fun." Observing the tormented skin, Talha spotted the thickest and reddest bump, below the left collarbone; purple scratch marks surrounded it. With a smirk, he poked the disturbed skin with his finger.

The reaper hissed, eyes wide with disbelief. Sucking his bottom lip into his mouth, he leveled Talha with a warning glare. "Don't do this, Mas-s-ster..."

Talha's anger vanished, as Slater furiously scratched the bump. He imagined the reaper cursing in the night, trying to relocate the anthill, ants stinging his hands and crawling under his clothes, yet, he'd never given up. The vivid image in his head broke the hanging tension. Laughter burst from his chest rocking his body.

Angry suspicion narrowed Slater's eyes as a question formed behind his blown pupils, still, Talha couldn't stop laughing. He thought that if he didn't know Slater, he would have never believed he was Iblīs. He looked so miserable, tearing at his itchy bump with his nails. If the trap in the forest had infuriated him, now it resembled a childish call for attention. Gasping for air, Talha wiped his running eyes, giving Slater a fresh, examining look.

*Maybe I'm overthinking it. Maybe he is an overgrown kid who never had a childhood or choice. Maybe he wants to be noticed?*

Fighting a smile had never been this hard. “Did you have fun? Was it worth it?”

“Yes, Master.” Slater grinned, his transparent eyes twinkling with mischief. “And about to have some more.”

Lightning of awareness struck Talha, as Slater ground his hips against his lower abdomen. Focus jumping down, he swallowed. Two thin layers of underwear prevented their private parts from touching, making him feel naked, unprotected.

The iron grip of Slater’s fingers clasped around Talha’s palm, still pressed against the oily chest. The drumming of the reaper’s heart so loud and fierce, that Talha thought it was about to break through the ribcage and leap out into his palm.

Using the moment of confusion, Slater glided the imprisoned limb across his pectoral muscles toward his nipple.

Dumbfounded, Talha gawked at the wet spot soaking through the fabric of Slater’s black trunks that stretched over his length. The lewd hips quivered under his gaze, rubbing the naked skin of his inner thighs against Talha’s flanks as Slater’s ass massaged his cock.

*Fuck my life; this motherfucker is already hard.*

The first impulse to smash this aroused face with his fists perished as he thought that it was exactly what Slater tried to achieve—to infuriate him, to make him lose control, to force the physical contact that might result in a mad, bloody fuck.

Glimpses of their previous encounter, the ones he thought he’d obliterated from his memory, resurrected in his mind with great detail. He remembered how warm and soft Slater’s insides had been. A male body, Talha knew was never designed to deliver such pleasure, had welcomed his every thrust with a blissful twitch of inner muscles. But, most of all, he remembered, the gaze. A single visible eye glowing with the pure fire of passion no mortal being was capable of. And that passion had been directed at Talha.

The mere memory washed him in heat. Pushing the reaper away, he won some space and, making sure his pupils trapped Slater’s, he commanded in a calm, measured voice, “Get. Off. Me.”

“Not tonight, Master. Slater has been patient. Slater waited. But Slater is getting thirsty. Play with me, Master.” Back arching, Slater guided Talha’s hand over his maculated chest and down to the red, round scar glowing above his left hipbone. When thick, blue veins throbbed beneath his touch, Talha snatched his hand away and

wiped the sticky ointment off on the sheet. His adrenaline spiking as his heart joined the rapid pulsations, echoing in his fingers. Slater's cheek twitched in disappointment, but the lust never drained from his eyes. "It's getting annoying, Master. Does Slater disgust you this much? That might be a problem..."

Talha didn't have time to process the question, because Slater added, "Tonight, Master doesn't have to touch, but Master has to watch."

Pulling the waistband of his trunks down, Slater revealed the maimed skin of his groin. This shameless action scalded Talha's face with a pungent heat of arousal and shame, sobering him.

*Coming into my bed in the middle of the night; shoving his dick right in my fucking face. And he expects me to do what, suck it? What does he think I am?* Never in his life had he expected to find himself in a situation like this, being pinned down by another man. A naked man, who watched him with the withering gaze of a woman. For many days Talha had tried to get used to the idea of touching Slater, fucking him. He could make his peace with a brutal, bloody fuck. At some deep, primeval, and unexplainable level, it felt innate. Like pristine, animalistic domination among the strongest, where the final accord was a sexual submission of one to another. With the right mindset, he was sure he could do it again. But with a cock swaying in front of his face, he felt like a molested girl in an overcrowded train.

"You have some nerve..." Talha groaned. Getting mentally ready for a fight, he peered up. Slater's jaw bulged with tension; the slit of his mouth so sharp, that his lips lost their color. Desire, mixing with uncertainty, settled in the void of his dilated pupils as his expression begged for something.

The human emotion in the murderer's eyes was fresh. Now, gazing at Talha with a mixture of a question, doubt, and craving, he looked young, almost vulnerable, as if he waited for appreciation or any kind of acceptance. Talha wavered, finding it weirdly appealing. *If Slater wasn't this pushy, he would even be cute.*

Under his inquisitive gaze, the younger man swallowed; the apple of his throat jumped, drawing Talha's attention to his protruding collarbones, stained with old burns. Lifting his ass from Talha's hips, Slater fixed the waistband of his trunks below his balls. His cock slapped against his lower abdomen, painting it with slick. The tight foreskin was stretched back against his length, revealing the glossy head; its dark, red color screaming of Slater's desperation.

Spitting in his palm, Slater pressed two wet fingers beneath the cockhead and drew a small circle around the frenulum. Every muscle on his body strained as small tremors rushed down his limbs. His eyelids hooded; he bit his bottom lip watching Talha from under long lashes.

Time died, as Talha stared into the galvanic blue of his gaze. The throbbing in his veins strengthened, as every flex of Slater's body promised him deprived, intense pleasure.

Slater's balls tightened, and Talha's vision zoomed to the hairless skin of his groin. If not for the scars, it would look smooth, tender. Saliva flooded his mouth, and even his vision resonated in beat with his building arousal.

*I didn't even hit him, yet I'm already hard... Why? Why do I react to him?*

No man had ever attracted him. No man had ever looked at him this way. He couldn't understand his own reactions and that confused him even more. Talha scowled, not ready to admit that another man attracted him on this level. *No way I'm going to play this game.*

"Cool down, Spotty. You're about as alluring as a beaten-up dog." Hiding his arousal behind scornful words was easier than admitting that he craved to push Slater down and fuck him senseless. "Come once you are healed."

He tried to sit up, but Slater's fingers clawed at his chest. Digging into the bandaged wound, they drew a painful hiss out of his mouth. Red bloomed under the murderer's touch.

"Master stays-s-s." It wasn't an order, but an ultimatum said in a breathless, heated voice, and then there was a moan. Strained, drawn out, vibrating. "Mhhh..."

Talha slapped the cruel fingers away from his hurting chest. "You are forgetting your place. I'm not here to please you, Mut."t.

Talha didn't know where the word came from, but the insult came out naturally.

Slater didn't seem to listen; the hard line of his mouth softened as he released the compressed air out of his chest. Lips parted, glistening with saliva, and Talha swallowed his words, staring at the glossy inner surface of his mouth. Its softness called for him, and Talha wondered how it would feel around his length.



That didn't make sense. Even if his gender wasn't a problem, he opposed everything that Talha found appealing. Rough, pushy, dominant, disrespectful, fickle, immoral, and childish. He was everything Talha couldn't stand in people, yet, watching him masturbate and scratch his itchy body simultaneously he couldn't help finding him cute and weirdly erotic.

Not for the first time, his morality, traditions, and upbringing screamed for him to reach for his gun and put a bullet between Slater's eyes, but a paralyzing heat, flooding his core, robbed him of the ability to move. Fighting his betraying body, Talha dropped his gaze.

*I'm so fucked... He thought, fixating his mind on his white-knuckled fist that crumpled the bedsheets. How can I want him? This is ridiculous...*

"Are you disgusted, Master?" Dark, hoarse notes in Slater's voice hauled Talha's attention to the reaper. Slater's stomach tightened, accenting every indentation of his toned muscles, as heavy crimson flushed his face, intensifying the dark color of his lips. "That's okay, too. As long as you watch, Slater doesn't mind. Watch, Master, watch."

*How can this be okay? This is so fucking wrong... How can you want to have sex with someone who you think is disgusted by you?*

"Did you come to Behçet's bed like this too?" He wasn't sure why he wanted to know, or even kept this conversation going. It wasn't his business, but for some reason, this information felt vital.

Slater startled; his hands stopped, and his left eye twitched.

"Why? Is this the reason for Master's disgust? Master doesn't want to touch what Asani touched?" Skin blanching, Slater tried to control the intensifying tic beneath his eye. Fruitlessly.

"Answer me."

Blue eyes frosted over, and a part of Talha's soul instantly missed that boiling lust that reigned there a moment ago.

"Slater did. Unlike Master, Asani understood Slater's needs and fulfilled them. He was a generous master..." Slater ran the back of his index finger across the scattering of white, wrinkled burns, decorating his lower belly. "...until Ifrit. Does Master want someone young too? Someone smooth and pretty? Is Slater no good?" The last words left his mouth like spite.

“Enough!” Hands clasp around Slater’s biceps, Talha shoved the reaper aside, revolted by the comparison and overshared information. Winning his freedom and a few seconds, he sat up only to shrink back as the reaper spun and surged at him. Plunging into the mattress, Talha barely managed to tug his right knee up to his chest, causing Slater’s solar plexus to collide with the sole of his foot.

“No, Master, not this time. Slater is tired of waiting. Don’t tell Slater he made a mistake. There, in the mosque, Master said you always get what you want. Slater believed you because Master said he wanted Slater. It was written in your eyes. The thirst that couldn’t be faked. Slater gave you a chance, even though Master didn’t fit. Was it a lie, Master?” The heavy gaze of pure, raw emotion charged through Talha’s core, making him wonder if it was hatred or lust or something else he observed. A labored breath washed his face in the sweet smell of freshly baked pastries. “Slater doesn’t think so. Slater is never wrong. Your thirst was pure. Then ... why? Master has already fucked Slater twice. Why does Master refuse now? Want to hurt Slater to get in the mood?”

His tic intensified, as Slater shot a look of dissatisfaction down, but the next instant, his visage cleared, and a toothy smile split his face. His hips rocked against Talha’s erection. “Ohhh, Master is in the mood. Master is just being ... shy. Adorable.”

“I told you to get the fuck off!” Tangling in the net of unwelcome arousal, Talha needed a second of quiet to collect his thoughts and control his needs, because whatever spell Slater cast, it was working. Thinking became harder and harder with every passing second. Giving in would be so easy now. Every cell of his body screamed for him to lean forward and crush Slater in an iron embrace so hard the reaper’s bones would crack in his arms. To slam into his willing body time after time, so Slater couldn’t stand for a week. *Yeah*, giving in would be so easy. Yet, something stopped him. Slater’s intentions lacked transparency, and because of it, Talha couldn’t come up with a consistent behavior strategy. If he fucked him now, Slater would take it as a green light and keep sneaking into his bed night after night. At that moment, Talha’s cock thought it was a brilliant idea; Talha’s mind insisted on the opposite. *What’s next? Why does it have to be Master, and Master only?*

“Slater doesn’t think so... Slater wants Master to look. Slater wants Master to touch...”

Swaddling his fingers around Talha's ankle, Slater guided the captured foot down his stomach until the sole reached his groin.

Talha stopped breathing as Slater's cock throbbed under his foot. His heart echoed in his fingertips and small veins under his eyes. Like a paralysis demon, Slater took his ability to blink and swallow. He could only watch the glossy cockhead slip up and down under his toes as Slater's hips moved in a slow, deliberate rhythm.

Massaging the red, blood-pumped flesh, he had to admit that the touch didn't gross him out. Contrariwise, he was rock-hard.

A clear drop of precum, rolling out of the slit, changed the velvety texture of Slater's cock making it slippery, tender. His foreskin moved with every thrust, hiding and revealing the violent-red head.

A pounding filled Talha's ears. He wasn't sure if the sound came from the pulsing veins of Slater's cock beneath his toes, or those were thuds of his heart. Like ritual drums, the beat entranced him, instilling a primeval urge into his core. One he never knew he possessed.

What Slater offered had an intoxicating taste of freedom. Unlike with a woman, this didn't have to be gentle. Unlike with a woman, he didn't have to control himself. Talha wondered how it would feel to completely let go. To let himself dissolve in lust and passion without thinking about hurting his partner. To go as fast and brutal as he pleased. Like the last time, but without anger dulling his sensations.

Slater's head snapped backward, providing with a perfect overview of his long neck, clean-shaven chin, and another cluster of mosquito bites. Shallow, short pants broke out of his throat, and his teeth bared in a painful grimace. A small, needy sound trembled in the air; Slater rolled his head to the side, sinking his canine tooth into his plump bottom lip.

Talha stopped understanding himself. He could have kicked the reaper out of his bed, beat the shit out of him, and leave his body in a pool of blood. He could have grabbed a gun and finish this madness here and now. Instead, he watched how flaming red spots bled through Slater's skin, mixing with scatterings of insect bites. How Slater's hips froze every time Talha's heel bumped against his tight, drawn-up balls, and how small intakes of air accompanied abrupt twitches of his shoulders. How droplets of sweat coated his skin. Mixing with ointment, they flared in the golden electric light.

Talha could have stopped this all, instead, he craved to reach out and trail the thick veins on Slater's neck; squeeze his throat to feel the beating of life beneath his fingertips. To hear air pass through the crushed trachea, and meet Slater's pupils—dilated with need and pleading. To paint his skin with fingerprints so it would bruise for a week. He craved Slater so bad, his bones itched, but the reaper slanted away. Pressing one palm against the mattress behind him, the reaper bowed his chest; his head fell backward as his breath trapped in his throat. Desperate thrusts of his hips quickened, and Talha's mind blanked. His mouth burned with a desire to lean forward and taste the salt of Slater's skin and paint his shoulders with bloody bite marks.

As if reading his mind, Slater's head snapped forward, and a heavy gaze shot through his core. Hypnotizing, stripping of pride and morality, it corroded Talha's soul, making him slowly accept the unacceptable.

At that moment, Talha truly believed that Slater could be Iblīs because he couldn't find another explanation for this doomed, diabolic lust.

A woman craved a man submitting to a law of nature. When a man craved a man it was haram<sup>[28]</sup>—a shameful sin. Yet Slater wasn't just a man. The bloodiest murderer of Anatolia, who mowed down souls and lives as if they were nothing, spread his legs for him. At that moment, Talha understood the Quran. Just like with Adam and Eve, Iblīs offered a temptation of forbidden fruit. But instead of knowledge, he offered power. The power to control the world and the devil. In exchange for his soul.

Talha had sinned. He'd killed, defrauded, kidnapped, and smuggled. Yet, despite straying from the loins of Islam, he somehow believed he wasn't completely doomed. Like there was still hope for salvation.

What Slater offered felt final, irrevocable. Because this time, sex wouldn't be forced by circumstances or alcohol. Because after this time, Slater would come to his bed and stay till morning, and what now felt like a mortal sin would soon become something regular, acceptable, welcomed. Talha figured it by looking in Slater's eyes.

Plump lips stretched, approaching, and Talha's whole entity concentrated on a white stripe of his teeth. They parted as if Slater wanted to consume him, and demanding words broke through. "Yes, Master, look at Slater."

The remains of Talha's will hung on the flimsy bridge his leg provided. If Slater slapped his foot away, Talha would have given in without a second thought. But Slater never did. His long lashes trembled, unveiling crescents of his eyes, murky with the heavy fog of thoughtless passion. He gasped for air, dropping his weight forward, as an agonizing grimace wrenched his mouth to the side. Needy noises at the back of his throat morphed into guttural groans before Slater sucked a mouthful of air, then stopped breathing.

Mirroring Slater's reactions, Talha's air passages blocked as he couldn't divert his eyes from the reaper, drinking in the contortions of his face. The longer he watched, the more entranced, intoxicated, he became.

His whole being was pure, pulsing heat. The room melted in front of his eyes, smudging the rich colors of his Persian carpets, as his focus followed a trajectory of a shimmering drop, skating down from Slater's neck to his chest until it disappeared in his hollow belly button.

Slater's jaw dropped as a cry of desperation passed through the vent of his throat. Every cell freezing in attention, Talha watched Slater's cock twitch, pulse, and spill creamy mess all over his foot.

Time died.

Fighting through the thickness of solidified air, Talha peered at the inflamed face, slack with pleasure, reddened eyes, and burning ears. It didn't look like Slater could think anymore or even swallow, as the corner of his mouth oozed with saliva.

Fighting the desire to wipe it off, Talha hauled his gaze down, ogling Slater's glistening chest, still quivering stomach, jerking hips, and pulsing cock. Deflating, it leaked with the last drops of tepid fluid.

*Sticky...* Talha's toes twitched, brushing over the slick cockhead. Cringing inwardly, he tried to pull his foot away, but Slater's grip tightened around his ankle. Using his foot as a brush, the reaper smeared his cum all over his abdomen.

"Thank you, Master." The low, liquid whisper rebounded in Talha's ears.

Enervated, Talha wrenched his focus away from Slater's red, swollen cock and up to his dark lips.

"Slater made a mess ..." The reaper grinned, shedding off the red glow of euphoria. His expression became serious, greedy,

yet, somehow, still uncertain. “Slater shall clean up.”

Lifting Talha’s foot to his mouth, the reaper rubbed his face against the soft hair of his shin, nibbled at the side of his calf. As if in a trance, Talha watched the flat tongue press against the prominent bone of his ankle before sliding down to the heel.

He stilled. His head was heavy, hot, and thoughtless, as the relentless tongue drifted up to his toes, the laps so delicate, they tickled and aroused at once.

“Delicious, Master.” Slater’s breath chilled the wet skin of his sole, cleansing his mind.

This was exactly how he felt. *Eaten alive*. Shame set his skin ablaze.

Working on an impulse, he kicked Slater’s chest. Falling backward, the reaper disappeared behind the bed with a heavy **THUD**. Rubbing the impact point with his palm, Slater rose to his feet, a murderous grimace crossing his face.

“Leave the room before I’m out of the shower,” Talha said, getting up. Avoiding looking at the reaper, he stumbled toward the bathroom, his erection hindering the tranquility of his gait. His hand flew up, hair-thin close to grab a handle, but froze, hesitating.

*If I leave now, I lose—he’ll think I’m running away again. It’ll only boost his ego and reaffirm his dominance. If I stay, he wins—this will be exactly what he wants. Me, fucking him senseless. Is there a way where I win, or do I lose no matter what? What happens if I do what he wants?*

Talha spun around.

Slater stood where he’d left him. Half-naked, still rubbing his spotty chest, he wore a lopsided smirk. Devilish flames dancing in his eyes convinced Talha in his rightness—inwardly, Slater was jeering.

*Fuck it! He wants a master, and he’ll get it. After all, Ejder is right. It’s only as serious as I let it be.* A growl broke from the depth of his chest as he took the first step toward the reaper. Gaze training on the mocking eyes, Talha cornered him step by step, wishing to erase that smirk off Slater’s face with his fists, then fuck his bloody mouth. *Will he like it?*

Eyes leveling, Talha grabbed his arm and jerked the younger man to himself. Slater swallowed getting visibly nervous. The

smugness, the domination—everything disappeared from his attitude, leaving only attention behind. Even his neck strained as he peered back. A shaky breath escaped his plump mouth and crushed against Talha's lips. His skin flared with a renewed color, bringing to Talha's attention the awakening, greedy glow in the depth of his glacial eyes.

Talha's breath caught up. The painful urge contracted his lungs when Slater's chest brushed against his own as the younger man sucked another breath. Slater exhaled and the skin contact broke, leaving behind the chill of the sticky ointment.

Talha's vision darkened, turning murky, and a million needles pierced his skin, making him itch for another touch. His elbows changed the angle, and Talha found his face hovering over Slater's. Inhaling a weird mix of cinnamon, vanilla, and menthol, he couldn't help but ogle the full, soft lips.

"Do it, Master. Unless you are scared." The variable voice demanded, and something snapped in Talha's brain, wiping off the remains of his self-control. Palm slamming against the reaper's shoulder, Talha pushed him to the bed, face down.

"Scared of whom? You?" The mattress dipped beneath his weight, he put his knee on the bed and slanted forward. His chest collided with the clammy back of the ripper, as his elbows dug into the mattress at either side of Slater's head. "You are still too wet behind your ears to make me fear you."

"No, Master isn't very smart to be scared of ... me." Slater's voice quivered. "But of having me..."

"Shut up, Reaper, if you want me to fuck you." Talha inched his face right, and his lips skimmed over Slater's hair. Reaching the ear, they stopped underneath, where a blue vein pulsed in the fast rhythm of Slater's drumming heart. His skin smelled like menthol and camphor oil, the scent so pungent Talha could taste it in his mouth.

*What the hell am I doing?* But the reply never formed, as the thought drowned in the raw, insane fervor. Sinking his teeth into the side of Slater's throat, he snaked his hand to Slater's trunks, then yanked them down.

Kicking Slater's legs apart with an impatient knee, he pushed down his own underwear, grabbed his cock, and guided it between Slater's butt cheeks. His mouth parched when his red head nudged the hot, twitching hole, smearing it with precum. The creasy tissue

of the sphincter stretched, and his blind head breached the opening with little resistance. Amazing heat and pressure engulfed him, pulsing around him, as he bucked his hips forward, slamming his length into the willing body.

Slater gasped; his eyes wide open as his knuckles imitating the color of the white bed sheet crumpled in his fist. Arching back, he bumped his sweaty temple against Talha's cheek, chasing for air with his opened mouth. Short, shallow panting broke out in a pulsing manner, signaling pain.

Talha didn't care. Pulling out, he banged in again. His hipbones collided with the soft roundness of Slater's ass so hard that his balls, slamming against the taint, rung with the painful impact. Talha was sure that Slater's ass would come out bruised after this night, but he didn't want to think about anything except the slick, soft passage.

The last time they had sex, Slater's insides weren't this slippery, but tight and resistant. Talha squinted down, half-expecting to see blood, but the rim of the pink hole oozed with a clear gel. *Lube? When did he prepare himself? Was he hoping for it?*

"More, Master," Slater moaned, as his slender body rounded in a perfect back-arch, every muscle taut. Talha's mouth watered with the wish to trace the groove of his spine with his tongue. At that moment, Slater reminded him of a Turkish bow—the most dangerous, most beautiful among the cold weapon. Supple, yet strong, Slater would look perfect with a bowstring connecting his neck and ankles.

Talha considered grabbing a rope and turning his fantasy into reality, but the immediate need overpowered. His hips thrashed against Slater's butt, as his fingers closed around the sinewy wrists, stabbing nails into the tender skin of the inner sides. The contractions of his hips so desperate, pleasure so intense, that Talha forgot how to breathe. When he remembered and snatched an almost painful intake of air, bright circles stained his vision, causing his head to spin.

His bristled chin scratched over Slater's shoulder-blades, leaving red scrape-burns behind. The reaper squirmed when his tongue lapped over the scattering of red insect-stings, making Talha want to tease him more, testing the limits of his sensitivity. The minty taste chilled his tongue, but he kept licking Slater's disturbed skin as his cock lurched deeper and deeper into Slater's core. The reaper convulsed beneath him, his arms trembled in the cage of



Talha's hands, and the prolonged cry vibrated in his chest, resounding in the place where Talha's lips glided over his back.

"Slower, slower..." Slater's eyes watered. The red spots popping on his neck crawled to his face, speckling his cheeks. The reaper tried to wrench his hand out of Talha's grip a second before his words choked in a bubbling cry. The contortions, coming from the depth of his ass, took over his body as he turned into a shaking mess. His forehead bumped against the mattress, fingers curled-tight around the linens, as his saliva pooled on the sheet beneath his cheek.

Talha hissed; his vision zooming out on Slater's face as the sinful body kept milking his cock with painful spasms of his inner muscles. Every thrust slower than the previous one as Talha fought with the tense, resisting body, thinking that he had never met anyone this sensitive in his life. Watching Slater's face distort in a powerful orgasm, he crushed Slater's wrists in his palms, releasing the burning pressure that seized his organs since the moment the reaper came to his bed. Jolting through his core, the powerful discharge extracted a groan out of his lungs, wiping his vision clean. His balls contorted, as his cock emptied itself into Slater's body.

Everything stopped existing, as the glow of euphoria blazed through him. Scalding his insides, it settled small tremors in his every muscle. His elbows gave in, and he collapsed on Slater's back. Separated by a thin layer of perspiration, Talha didn't feel repulsed but satisfied as his head rang with emptiness.

Lungs burning, he rolled to his side and onto his back, blinking with unseeing eyes. His heart so violent in his chest that it threatened to burst any moment. Closing his eyes, he relaxed, feeling the blood returning to his head with small prickling.

"That was hot, Master!" Slater leered. "Let's do it again."

Even with his eyes closed, Talha felt Slater's face hovering over him. Hand against Slater's chest, Talha locked out his elbow, setting a bigger distance between them. "If you have energy left, go bring clean sheets."

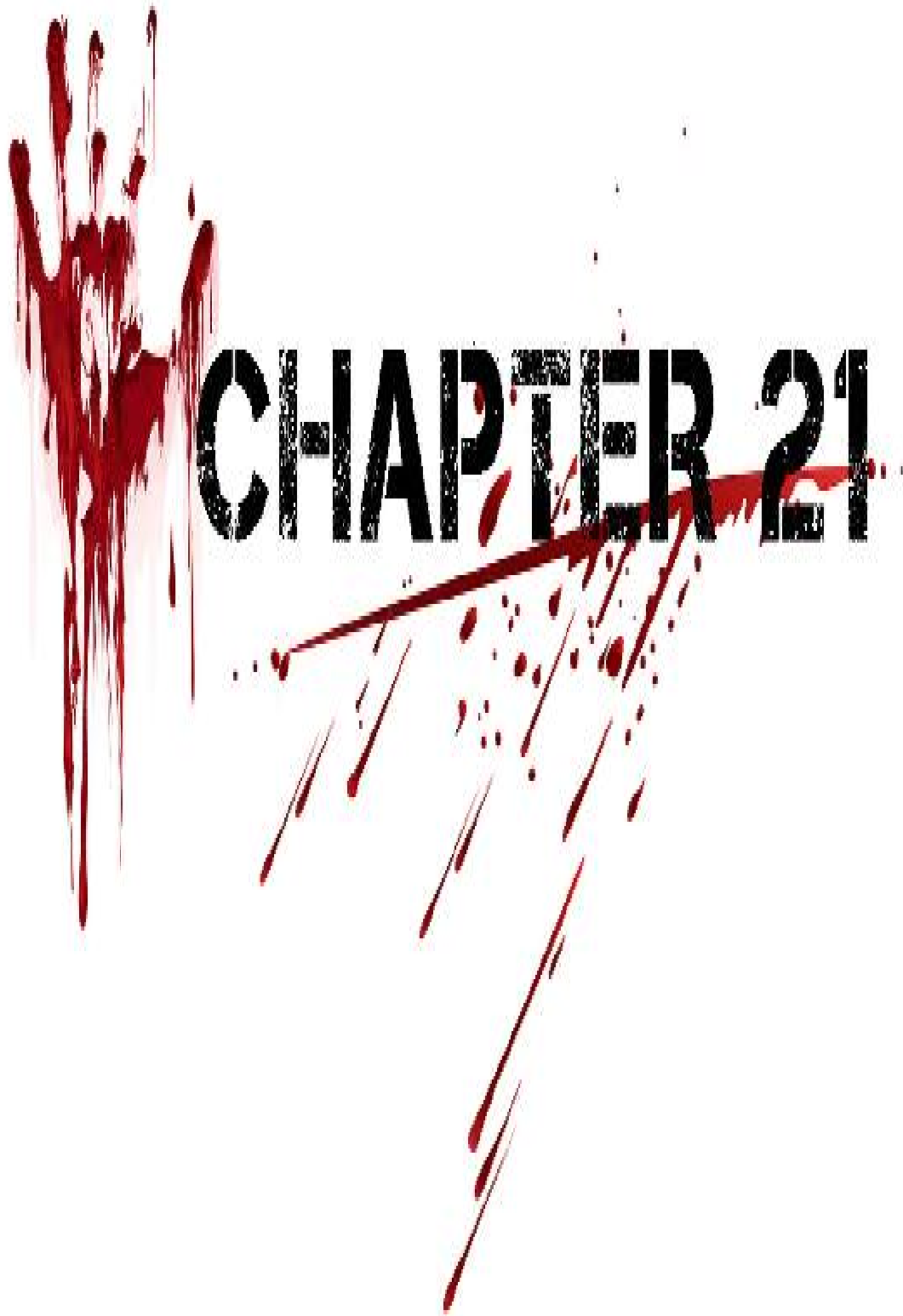
"But..."

"Do I need to repeat myself?"

"No, Master..."



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**PRESENT**

**TALHA FLINCHED AS SOMEONE** touched his shoulder. He hadn't heard the door being opened when Dinçer entered the room.

The tide of memories ebbed, leaving his face tingling with heat as he snatched his gaze away from Slater.

“You aren’t supposed to be here; it’s a resuscitation unit,” Talha said. “Step out.”

More people fell into the picture as he looked over Dinçer’s shoulder. Two bodyguards and Ejder. Eyes glowing with hatred, he hovered in the doorway, never looking away from Slater. His lips paled as he muttered something under his breath.

Stepping toward him, Talha shielded the wounded man with his chest, bringing his brother’s attention to himself. “Ejder?”

“What the fuck, Abi? You even put him in the hospital? After everything he did? Shoot him now!”

Talha sighed and closed his eyes, collecting his thoughts. He wasn’t ready to deal with Ejder’s outrage. Not now. That was exactly why he’d needed Dinçer to come alone.

“You look good too, Kardeşim. It’s nice to see you. Now, please, wait outside.” Giving his brother a light cheek pat, Talha U-turned Ejder and urged him out of the room. The soles of Ejder’s shoes squeaked against the floor as he pushed back.

“I’m not leaving. What’s wrong with you? Is a concussion clouding your judgment? Do you even know what he did?” Wriggling out of Talha’s grip, Ejder snarled, his eyes full of hostility.

“Watch what you say, Kardeşim. I might be your brother, but I’m still your Reis.” Talha said calmly. “If you aren’t happy with how things are, go home to Mardin. Now, please, leave the room. Whatever you have to say, it has to wait until we are home. Alone.” Losing his interest in his brother, Talha faced his friend. “Dinçer, did you bring my clothes?”

Ejder’s face blanched as he stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind his back.

“He’s worried about you. We all are. This whole thing was hard on him. At first, we didn’t even know if you were among the dead. So many bodies were disfigured beyond recognition.” Dinçer allowed himself to remark, placing a garment bag over the back of the chair. “And instead of letting him know in person that you are okay, you are guarding this... dog.”

Talha grimaced as acrid guilt surged into his system. “I know; I was there. I’ll explain everything once we are home. Please,

calm him down and send Miraç here.”

With a nod, Dinçer strode toward the door. Before leaving the room, he glanced over his shoulder. “Talha... I’m glad you are fine.”

Alone again, Talha rubbed his chest. The air seemed to clot in there, it felt so tight. Even after he’d changed into his own clothes, relief didn’t come. A heavy, unsolved issue weighted his shoulders as his eyes kept drifting to Slater.

The low hissing of the medical ventilator grew louder as he approached the bed; his gaze finding Slater. Usually fluid and erratic, the reaper lay motionless as if all the flames had abandoned Iblīs’ mortal shell. A part of Talha craved to touch his hand, but he quickly crushed his desire in his balled fist. There was no reason for physical touch, as Slater wasn’t his anymore. The thought was hard to swallow and landed heavily in the pit of his stomach, but he still processed it getting used to the idea.

He was eager to bend down and brush his lips across the corner of Slater’s mouth, where the tape held the tube in place. To plant a last kiss across the cold, still mouth, but he refrained, needing to get his emotions out of the way or killing Slater would be impossible.

Swallowing against the lumps of his throat, he whispered, “Next time we meet, one of us dies. If you can—run because this is as much as I can do for you. Farewell, Slater.”

“Reis...” Miraç cleared his throat and closed the door. “Did you ask for me?”

“Yes.” Talha straightened up. Still looking at Slater, he said, “Keep him heavily sedated, put him in a coma, or tie him down if you can. Once he’s awake, he will cause a lot of trouble. I’ll leave guards, but nothing can really stop him. Maybe only a bullet in his head. Should I leave you a gun?”

Miraç snorted.

“It’s a hospital, Reis. We don’t harm people here, we cure them. Keep your guards at home.” He smiled; the corners of his eyes cracked with laughter lines as he quoted the Quran. “‘*My mercy embraces all things.*’ Even Iblīs. We will be fine; cancel the contract.”

“As you wish...”

“What are you going to do with him?” Miraç’s serious eyes fixed on him.

“Kill him...” Talha gulped down a sudden flood of sour saliva. Losing control over his facial muscles, he winced. “I have to kill him. There is no cure for a mad dog but a bullet.”

Miraç didn’t reply. Talha faced him. The lenses of thin glasses flared with green, reflecting the light. The doctor stepped toward the bed.

“Why don’t you pray tonight? A good prayer will bring peace to your mind.”

A wry smile twisted Talha’s mouth. “No prayer can grant me what I want.”

“*“But they plan, and Allah plans. And Allah is the best of planners.”*” He quoted the Quran again. “Pray tonight, Talha, and don’t worry about him. There is a reason why he was created. You just don’t know it yet.”

“Oh, I know why he was created. To become my downfall.” Talha slapped the doctor’s shoulder, moving to the doors. “I’ll send someone to collect him soon. Don’t let him escape, and don’t disclose his identity to anyone. Also...”

“Reis?”

“Don’t tell anyone about Camilla’s body parts. Keep them secure. I need to think about how to clean this mess.”

“Don’t worry, Reis. Go home, rest well, and don’t forget your medicine.”



**THE ROAD TO THE MANSION** stretched time in reality. Sticky and heavy, the silence condensed the atmosphere, making it nearly impossible to breathe. Concentrating on the road, Dinçer kept silent, but Ejder's palpable anger pressed on Talha's nerves. He opened the window, letting in street sounds and fresh air. Leaning toward the gushes of air, he closed his eyes.

The mere thought of entering the mansion cramped his stomach, reminding him of the diabolic feast Slater had cooked for him.

*So much blood... Was it removed? Could it even be removed?*

"What should I expect in the mansion?" he asked, without opening his eyes.

"Lots of people. Some from the Hale family, some ours. Police, too. Those who were worried and those who want to know what happened," Dinçer replied.

"Haven't you told them?" Talha cracked one eye open, hoping for a negative answer. If Dinçer had managed to avoid unnecessary information circulation, it would be so much easier for him to clear the mess.

“In general, yes,” Dinçer said, glancing in the rearview mirror from the driver seat. Talha winced. “The maids told us everything.”

“What did they say?”

“As if you don’t know.” Ejder snapped. Spinning in the rear seat, next to him, he faced Talha. “You can always ask your protégé. Unless you want to see the pictures?”

“Ejder...” Talha swallowed his rising anger. “Please, spare me from your sarcasm. I have a headache. Who was the poor bastard that discovered the bodies?”

“That would be me,” Dinçer sighed. “You didn’t answer your phone, and I couldn’t reach anyone in the mansion.”

“What was the procedure? Did you involve the police?”

Dinçer shrugged. “Who do you think I am, a magician? It wasn’t one body you can dump anywhere, it was a fucking massacre. It blew up before we knew it. Everyone knows now.”

Heart sinking, Talha kept asking, “What about the footage from the security cameras?”

“There was nothing. He took everything.”

“Fingerprints?”

“Slater doesn’t have them, does he?”

“No DNA as well?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

Talha nodded a few times, processing the information. A splitting headache frustrated and annoyed. He rubbed his temples with icy fingers. “Ejder, when you put a bounty on Slater’s head, did you call him Iblīs?”

“N-no, but it’s clear.” Hesitation crossed Ejder’s serious face; his eyes full of defense. “Only an idiot won’t make a connection.”

“Call it off.”

“What, now?” Ejder frowned.

“Now. You don’t want to cause Miraç problems, do you?” Turning back to Dinçer, Talha kept investigating, “So, I assume, the Hale family blames Iblīs?”



“Everyone does. People say he betrayed you like he betrayed Behçet. Isn’t it what happened?” Ejder said, fishing for his phone. Quick fingers flew over the touch screen, as he entered the Dark Net and removed the contract.

Talha ignored him, building a picture in his head. To keep everyone happy, he needed something more solid than a jealous assassin. Long ago, Talha learned that sometimes good can come out of a bad situation. Maybe he still could turn this disaster to his advantage or, at least, minimize the damage. “Tonight, Slater returned covered in blood. Who did he kill?”

Taking a turn, Dinçer replied keeping his eyes fixed on the road, “Just some street thugs.”

“Do they work for anyone?”

“They were from the Tekin family, but they are small potatoes. No one will care about them.”

“The Tekin family? Aren’t they under the Kılıç group?”

“Technically, yes. But the Kılıç group only uses them for dirty jobs.” Dinçer squinted up. “Why?”

“No reason.” Talha chewed on his bottom lip, his mind whirling. “Where are the maids?”

“Some quit, some are still in the mansion. Why?”

“Dinçer... Clear the house, but leave the staff in. I won’t be giving my statement today. Ask them to come tomorrow.” Talha directed, closing his eyes.

“You can’t be serious...” Ejder protested. “They need to see you now. The Hale Family has the right to know what had happened to your bride. You can’t throw them out like this.”

“I can, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do.” Talha closed his eyes, leaning against the backrest. “Tell them I’m not well, which is the truth. Now, keep quiet, my head is spinning...”



**THE CAR PULLED** to a stop. Ejder got out and slammed the door as a final argument. A childish gesture he'd carried through the years. Talha opened his eyes, sighed, and got out.

Entering his mansion felt weird. Despite being missing for only four days, it felt like an eternity had passed, yet the memories were vivid.

A single thread of Christmas lights, leading him in the Grand Hall... Pools of blood marring the white marble... Slater's liquid voice brimming with pride... Everything felt and sounded too real in his head. Step after step, he climbed the stairs, sure that as soon as he turned around the corner, he would see Camilla's decapitated frame, Zaal's baked head, and dozens of mutilated bodies.

But no blood, no stench of death greeted him on the second floor, only the closed double doors of the Grand Hall. He couldn't remember them ever being closed before. He loved the airy space open doors created. In the daytime, the sun flooded the Grand Hall and showered the top of the staircase, making the marble painfully bright. In the night, the bluish light of the moon silvered the staircase, creating a surreal, ephemeral picture.

That realization made him reluctant to open the doors, as a haunting suspicion that the Grand Hall still washed in blood

increased. Crushing the momentary weakness, he grabbed the handles with both hands and shoved the doors open.

Acute brightness stabbed his eyes. Blinking through the welling tears with his oversensitive eyes, he couldn't find a single dark spot among the pristine whiteness. The tables had disappeared, so had the Christmas tree and not a single chair remained inside. No curtains enveloped bare windows. The blood was washed away and the acrid smell of antiseptic replaced the stench of death.

Nothing reminded of the horrific events that had happened here mere days ago.

Keeping close to the wall, Talha drifted around the perimeter. A cascade of blood-curdling memories, surfaced in front of his eyes, overwhelmed his mouth with a sour taste. Wanting to spit, he swirled, facing the empty spot where two throne-like chairs used to stand. The flicker of silverish marble resembled a glint on the silver cover he had held in his fingers, as he examined Zaal's severed head.

Talha had seen lots of death in his life. Some were necessary, some were accidental, some hurt more than the others, some didn't touch him at all. But this... This felt horribly wrong. The realization aggravated his guilt.

"None of this was supposed to happen..." he whispered, to disperse the cataleptic silence that seized his mansion.

"It's too late for that now, isn't it?" Ejder's accusing words cut the air as he strode past him. Hands crossed over his chest, he froze in the middle of the hall, granting Talha a hard stare. "I warned you. I told you this would happen, yet you never listened. What are you gonna do now, Abi?"

"Who knows..." Talha faced the window. The bright light he used to love now felt intrusive. "Put the black curtains up. Print Camilla's portrait, frame it, and attach a black ribbon to it. Put it on a stand and bring the table back, but no chairs. People should remain standing. Do it today. I'll be giving my statement here tomorrow. Only the Hale Family and my people. No outsiders, no police."

His focus jumped around until it stumbled over the black figure standing in the doorway. The surprise in the dark eyes of his lieutenant was obvious, but Dinçer quickly steeled his face into a mask of dispassion. "Shall I take care of it, Talha?"

"Please, do."

“This is a bad idea,” Ejder said, rubbing his shoulders. “She died here. Even being here now feels disrespectful. It’s like... the signs of death are everywhere. This whole place is giving me chills now. Think about her family. All they see here will be blood and the massacre. Instead of listening to you, they will be imagining what happened to her here. People will think you are heartless or that you don’t respect the dead.”

“They might if I fail...” Talha said, blood pounding in his head. *But if my words reach them, they will have a greater effect. People’s minds will be more receptive here exactly because of the tragedy.*

“Sell this place.” Ejder pressed, and Talha raised his hand, demanding silence.

“I’m selling nothing. Please, do what I ask without arguing. I’m tired.”

Jaw squaring, Ejder drew his shoulders up and forward. “I don’t like it. I know that look in your eyes. You are playing games. Why? You will give him up, won’t you?”

Talha replied with an ambiguous movement of his head, and Ejder, materializing by his side, grabbed his shoulder. Hellish flames dancing in his glare, as he leveled his eyes with Talha’s. “There is no other way. Either you give him away, or I demand the Royal Game.”

“The Royal Game?” Talha shot up a brow, too tired to laugh. “And who would be the game? Me?”

“Iblīs.”

Talha smirked, shaking the painful grip off his shoulder. “No, you won’t. I’ll never allow it.”

“I’m not asking you.” Ejder deadpanned. “I demand his head. It’s my right.”

“You demand nothing.” Slamming his palm against his brother’s chest, he ground out the words. “While I’m the head of the family, you will listen to me. I will not allow the Royal Game. Is it clear?”

“Talha...” Dinçer’s face darkening with every step as he approached. “Ejder isn’t the only one who wants him dead. I’m sorry, but he pissed off too many people. The Game is inevitable and the most merciful death for him.”

Ignoring his friend, Talha kept going, “You have no idea what you are talking about. You will die there and bring death to all the hunters. He will laugh while feeding you part by part to snakes. Don’t you remember how wrong the last game went?”

Dinçer frowned. His eyes flickering between Talha and Ejder. “Was he there?”

“What are you trying to say?” Ejder growled.

“What do you think happened back then? Salik?” Without waiting for the reply, Talha finished, “Slater was unhappy because I didn’t let him join the game, so he entertained himself instead. Back then, he was playing, fooling around. Now, imagine him getting serious.”

Disbelief narrowed Ejder’s black eyes. Talha instantly hated that look on his brother’s face. “Then kill him now, while he is still unconscious...”

“I don’t want to say that, but Ejder is right. You don’t have a choice, Talha.” Dinçer said. “If not him, it will be us. The Hale family demands his head. If you shield Iblīs, they will come after you.”

*Shut up, I know it already.* Talha closed his eyes.

“Abi, please, listen to Dinçer.”

“No, you listen. Do what I say or go home to Mardin. Iblīs is mine, and I’m not giving him to the Hale Family, you, or anyone else. His life belongs to me, and only I can take it, is it clear? He’ll die from my hand when I decide it’s time. That’s it for today. I need to rest. I’m tired.” He faced the door but halted. “Dinçer, don’t leave yet. I might need you later.”



**THE HOPE TO FALL** into the oblivion of a dream crushed against the cold mattress. He'd been sure that sleep would swallow him as soon as his head touched the pillow, but he kept tossing and turning, uncomfortable in the cool softness of linens. Something felt lacking, and he couldn't figure out what. Everything seemed normal. The smell of bitter almond suffused the air. The mashrabiya windows glowed with golden light, casting symmetrical patterns over the fluffy carpets, and not a single bird chirped outside.

It was quiet. *Too quiet.*

Instead of relaxing, Talha's senses sharpened, as if his whole body expected an attack any moment. He wasn't used to silence and solitude. Not anymore. Life with Slater had never been quiet. The unquenchable energy the reaper oozed filled his days with constant chaos. The one he learned to live in. The one he didn't know how to live without anymore.

*Why do I think about him? It's already decided. If he won't run, I'll kill him...*

Yet, despite the thought, he couldn't escape the hollow feeling of loss that dented his chest. The bed became uncomfortable as if stuffed with needles. He sat up so abruptly that blood, draining from his head, left him blinking through the darkness of his failed

vision. The buzzing in his teeth and nape washed him in cold sweat and intensified the piercing noise drilling a hole in his brain.

Camilla's head. Slater. The Hale Family. The Kılıç group. Slater again. Ejder. The police. *Fuck... How do I solve this all in one go?*

The stinging swarm of his thoughts refused to abate. They throbbed and thrashed in his skull making sleeping impossible, yet, they also refused to form anything more or less substantial, as everything seemed to center around Slater. His invisible presence, sweet, flowery scent, flowing rivulets of his speech, and the electric gaze of his pale, intense eyes.

"Fuck it!" Tossing the blanket away, he got up. The first desire to grab sleeping pills conflicted with a need to keep his head clear. The medication would probably make him drowsy the next day, and he still didn't know which story to tell. Also, it wouldn't solve his problem. No drug would.

"I wonder if he has already woken up..."

Tugging on his jeans, he grabbed a clean shirt before storming out of the room. Striding down the corridor, he yanked the door to his office open, hoping to find Dinçer there.

Two pairs of eyes shot up as he stumbled into the room barefoot, the smell of cannabis too vivid in the air. Rolling his head from one shoulder to the other, Ejder brought his hand to his mouth, taking a long draw on a half-smoldered joint. The drug weighted his eyelids and clouded his gaze.

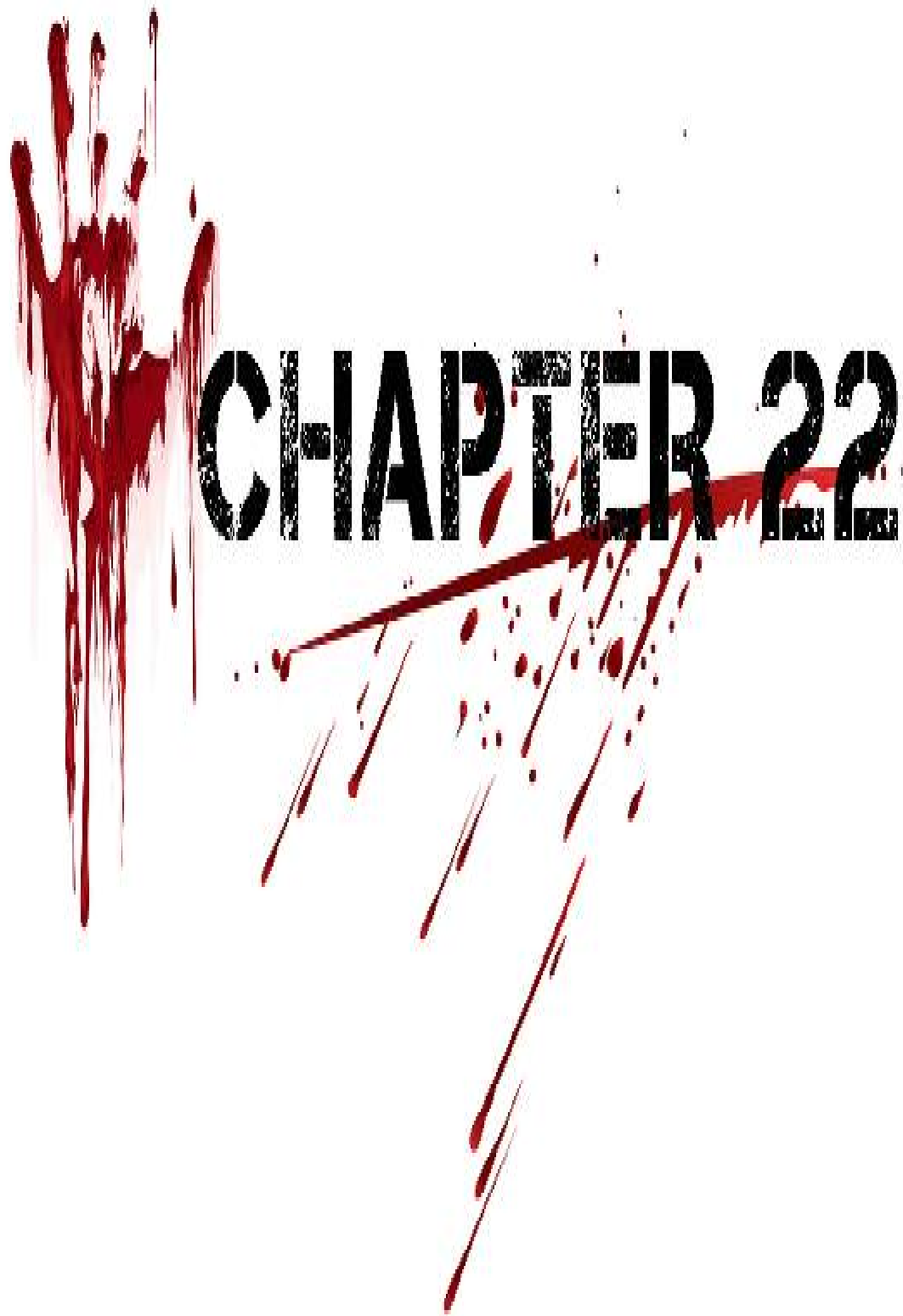
Propping the bookcase with his wide frame, Dinçer cocked a brow. "Weren't you tired?"

"I need Ifrīt. Now."



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**“YOU ARE INSANE...”** Ejder concluded. Small hiccupping laughter settled in his chest, turning into giggling. The ashes, falling from the tip of his joint, crashed against his blue shirt, but he didn’t

seem to notice it. Poking the burning side in the air, toward Dinçer, he added, “You both are if you’re considering it.”

“Back then, you said anyone can be Iblīs, didn’t you?” Keeping his voice low and calm, Talha faced Dinçer. “They worked together. Maybe trained together. Can’t he do what Slater does?” Dinçer scowled, and Talha pressed, “I’d like to see him. Now.”

“Savaş is nothing like Slater. If Slater is just a crazy psycho with no agenda, Savaş is complicated. He seldom smiles, and if he does, you wish he didn’t. There is nothing he enjoys. If you gave him a virus to destroy all life on Earth, he’d release it.” Messing his hair with his hand, Dinçer pushed off the bookcase and shuffled to the window. His fingers gripped the corner, spreading tension up to his broad shoulders. “If I ask him to do what you ask, I don’t know how I’m going to pay for it. Whenever I ask him to do something, he twists my every word.”

“Because he hates you. You ruined his beautiful face,” Ejder remarked, stretching his sinewy body over the cowhide sofa. His face relaxed and his eyes dropped closed.

“Then let me ask,” Talha said.

Dinçer scrunched his face, back facing the window. The gaze of his dark eyes lay heavy on Talha. “I made a deal with him five years ago. Once he grants my three wishes, I have to grant one of his. I used up two of them already.”

“What did you ask for?” Ejder leaned up, his eyes shimmering with curiosity.

“It doesn’t matter.” Dinçer waved his hand in the air. “But I never intended to use the third one.”

“You know, guys, you are insane. You don’t learn, do you?” Ejder’s voice sounded too loud with high-pitched, badly controlled intonation.

Talha cringed. “You are high, and no one wants your opinion.”

“Fuck off, I just started. I have every right to be high. You have no idea what I felt while you were protecting that piece of shit.” Ejder’s fist bumped against the sofa’s backrest. “And even if you don’t want my opinion, I’ll still say this. Things are happening because you brought all this upon yourselves. And you are about to step into the same trap. Kill them both and everyone’s life will be easier. The bullet is your only answer.”

“Shut the fuck up, Ejder,” Talha said, grabbed a book from a shelf, and threw it at his brother.

Despite the visible sluggishness, Ejder’s reactions were quick with a forearm block. He laughed, then closed his eyes.

“It’s not about Slater. It’s about business. We can get rid of the Kılıç group and pacify the Hale Family in one go. If I have Ifrīt.”

Shaking his head, Dinçer sighed, “Fine.”

**STANDING ON THE WATERSIDE,** Dinçer’s mansion overlooked the bright blueness of Bosphorus Strait and smelled like sea and citrus. White chiffon curtains flapped in the air as the breeze blew into the room through the opened windows. Sitting on one of the wide, cushioned windowsills in the guestroom, the slender figure dressed in black never moved, even though Talha knew Savaş had heard them entering.

While Talha studied his flawless profile, Dinçer perched himself on the opposite side of the windowsill, seeking Savaş’ attention. Five years had passed since the last time they’d met. Savaş matured. His cheeks hollowed as his jaw squared and stubble grayed his olive skin, yet he was still beautiful. The gentle line of his lips brought to his clean features an almost angelic look, if not for the

eyes. Wolfish, yet somehow glassy, they expressed nothing, as if his soul wasn't present in the shell of his long-limbed, slender body.

Talha voiced his request, but Savaş didn't react, staring somewhere beyond the horizon. Not used to being ignored, Talha glanced at Dinçer but received a shrug in return.

"Did you hear me?" Only Dinçer's presence stopped him from grabbing the younger man's shoulder and compelling him to look up.

"I did." Savaş soft, honeyed baritone sounded too smooth for his liking. Slowly, the reaper fixed his unblinking, yellow gaze on Talha. Two perpendicular, ugly scars maimed his right cheek connecting at his cheekbone, where the bullet had hit him. "I don't work for you, Reis. I never swore to serve you. I can't help you."

"Then start now." Talha cut the distance; a breeze caressing his face intensified the smell of spicy oranges and burned wood. "What do you want for your service?"

The way Savaş examined him gave him chills. His gaze was an abyss of a void, not even darkness reigned there. "You can't give me anything, because you have nothing. You wouldn't come to me if you had a choice, so I assume that without me your whole Empire will collapse."

Talha laughed. "Don't underestimate me, ripper. My Empire won't collapse, but I need you now because you can do what Iblīs does, and I don't have time to look for anyone else."

Savaş lips formed what Talha assumed was a smile. The scarred, pink tissue stretched over the bulging muscle of his cheek, lips drew up, revealing his white teeth with pointy canines. The muscles of the damaged half of his face didn't respond correctly, and the smile evolved into a demonic, lopsided smirk. At that moment, Talha understood Dinçer's words that it would be better if he never smiled. With his empty eyes, this kind of smile appeared psychopathic, scary.

"Hmmm? What happened to Slater?" Amusement, too evident in his voice, didn't reach his eyes but syringed anger into Talha's veins.

"None of your business. Will you help or not?"

"I wish I could help you, Reis, but I'm already bound with a contract. I don't serve two masters at once. You can't wish, but he can." He tossed a meaningful glance at Dinçer.

“No. I pay for myself. Is there another way?”

“There is.” Savaş grinned showing that hellish smile again. “Kill Dinçer, and I’ll grant three of your wishes. I won’t even ask for payment.”

“Don’t be silly,” Talha sighed, wondering why it was always so hard to deal with rippers. “Ask for something else.”

Savaş’ grin flattened into a colorless slit; he fixed his heavy gaze at Dinçer. The tint of honey in his voice gone, and a demonic, hoarse voice broke out of his mouth. “He wishes, or no deal.”

“If he does, how do I know you won’t ask for his life in return?”

“Oh, you don’t, Reis.” The honeyed voice returned. Savaş’ whiskey-colored eyes glinted with fire as he tossed an uncaring glance at Talha. “But isn’t it more fun this way?”

Dinçer’s face darkened with every second, and a weird expression settled in the depth of his dilated pupils. Talha felt a weird kinship with that emotion that presented a bitter mixture of pity, regret, and hurt.

*Maybe Ejder was right. Maybe I have brought it upon myself, and now I’m about to do it to Dinçer.*

“Make your last wish!” Savaş urged, slanting forward in a predatory pose, his eyes feasting on Dinçer as wind disarranging his hair.

*He’s even worse than Slater. At least Slater is pure and transparent in his desires.*

“Forget it.” With a dismissive flick of his wrist, Talha moved to the door. The whole conversation felt like a waste of time, as the little punk only wanted to get back at Dinçer. “Maybe people are right when they say you are nothing without your pretty face. It was stupid of me to think you can be Iblīs, after all, you are too delicate to do what he does.”

“Think whatever you want, Reis, but this cheap trick won’t work on me. If you change your mind, you know my conditions.”

“I won’t.” Talha waved his hand in the air. *Dinçer was right. Savaş is nothing like Slater. Not cute at all...*

“Wait...” Dinçer croaked. An intake of air preceded the low sound of his request. “Do what Talha wants. Please.”

“No-o-o. I don’t want this.” Talha spun and instantly regretted it because Savaş was smiling.

“Too late, Reis.” A satiated look wiped out the nothingness from Savaş’ eyes, as he brought his hand in the air and snapped his fingers. “Granted, Master, or should I say former master?”

Dinçer’s expression didn’t change, but the color of his skin paled a fraction.

“Oh,” Savaş knitted his brows in an exaggerated sympathy, “don’t be so sad. It’s not like it’s a farewell. Once I’m done, I’ll come to collect the debt.”

With a quick nod, Dinçer left the room.

In the car, eye to eye with Talha, he spoke again. “I didn’t do it for you, so quit looking at me like this.”

“Then why?” Talha asked, suppressing the urge to look in the mirror and find out what expression he wore.

“Who knows...” Dinçer shrugged. “Anyway, if I ever need a favor, you will remember this time, and you will help me, even if it’s to your disadvantage.”



**“WHY DON’T YOU GO** and see him, Reis?” Miraç asked, pushing an elevator button. With a chime, the doors closed and the

cabin moved down.

“I saw him this morning. Don’t think anything changed since,” Talha deadpanned, resting his eyes at the changing numbers on the board. “Is he awake yet?”

“No. He lost a lot of blood, but he’s stable. I expect to take him off the lung ventilation and out of the intensive care by tomorrow morning. It means he should wake up in a few hours, or that’s my hope. He is strong; he should make it.”

Reluctant to express his interest in Slater’s wellbeing, he was grateful for the updates.

“A few hours...” Unconsciously, Talha checked his gold watch. It showed seven PM.

His eyes hurt. Every movement of his eyelids sandpapered his eyeballs. He needed to rest but was short on time. To make his plan work, he had to meet Güvenç in one hour, pass the delivery to Savaş tonight, and speak to every staff member who survived that night. Taking care of the wounded Slater would ruin everything.

“If he wakes up, keep him sedated. I can’t deal with him right now.”

The metal doors slid open letting them into the chilled, spacious morgue; a portable medical refrigerator placed on a dissection table. The bluish light, coming from the tube lamps, glinted off the chrome sinks and tables. Blue checkered tiles reflected in the polished aluminum cabinets, and everything felt dead, even the air saturated with formaldehyde. The temperature here was lower than on the upper floors, and Talha already felt his skin prickling.

Snapping the medical gloves on, Miraç approached the refrigerator and hauled one of the body trays out. There, covered with a white sheet, something delicate rested on a stainless steel plate.

With a habitual casualness, the doctor tossed the sheet aside, picked up Camilla’s body parts, before placing them into the portable fridge.

“Here you go.” He smiled with the tranquility of a pizza delivery guy. “If you are going to keep her in here longer than twenty-four hours, you need to plug it in, ok?”

Talha didn't answer, staring into the fridge. Camilla's eyes were still open, and despite the milky fog covering her pupils, he couldn't shake off the illusion that she stared at him, accusing him.

"Sorry about her eyes. I don't think that closing them would be wise in this situation." Miraç flung the cover closed and fastened the lid with the gray, plastic buckles. "I washed all the traces of DNA and possible fingertips off her, so make sure not to touch her."

Shaking off the unpleasant feeling the dead eyes settled in him, Talha picked up the fridge. Giving the doctor a long look, he said, "Thank you, Miraç. I appreciate it."



**GÜVENÇ DIDN'T DOUBT** a single word of his story, making things easier for Talha. His wide face reddened with every word, nostrils flared, and bushy brows knitted. A few times, he jumped to his feet, shaking his massive fists in the air in a powerless fury, but after glancing at Talha, he would huff and sit down again.

When Talha finished his long explanation, Güvenç got up, pressed his palm to his chest, and bowed his head.

"I'll make them pay, Reis. I swear on my blood, your bride will be avenged."



“Thank you, my friend. I never doubted you.” Talha nodded, keeping his face straight. “Can I expect the army to be ready tomorrow?”

“Just command, Reis.”



**SITTING ON THE HOOD** of his car, Talha rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. Despite the engine being turned off for almost half an hour, the hood was still warm.

“How much longer?” he groaned, taking in the sleepy sky, cloaked in featherlike clouds. Exhausted, he craved the soft warmth of his bed before he collapsed.

“It’s almost twelve. She should be here any minute,” Dinçer said, glancing at his watch. “Oh, here she is.”

Talha got up and straightened his t-shirt. After a long day, it clung to his skin, making him feel filthy. The slender woman peeked over her shoulder, in the depth of the dark alley, before hurrying toward him.

“Did you bring it?” Impatience forced him to take a step toward her.

“Yes, Reis.” The young woman with her hair tied in a high ponytail and her eyes heavy with makeup, fished for something in

her huge bag. A handkerchief transferred from hand to hand. Cringing with disgust, Talha unwrapped it, revealing the tied up condom, containing creamy liquid.

“Whose?”

“Musa Kılıç,” she replied, eyeing him. The redness of her sclera and the hooded lids spoke of her exhaustion, yet they clasped him with predatory interest.

“You are a smart woman, aren’t you? I don’t need to say anything, right?”

“Don’t worry, Reis. I’m certainly not stupid.” A sour smell so characteristic of chain-smokers washed over him with her words.

“Okay. What do you want for your service and silence?” Looking her in the eye, he read her facial lines like an open book. She didn’t have an easy life, but she kept herself well-presented. In her mid-twenties, she covered dark circles around her eyes with a layer of make-up the same way she hid the hickeys and bruises left by her clients.

“I have a child. I want a future for him. A secured future. Food, education, clothes. I don’t want him to be in need of anything. You must know how hard it is for a single mother to provide for a child.”

“I do...” Talha nodded. *Better than anyone.*

He remembered his mother and all those nights when she had been gone. The shame of her downfall, the guilt for his own insignificance, the hope to change things for the better.

“How old is he?”

“Three.” She beamed, like all mothers do when they talk about their kids.

“Okay. Don’t worry about anything. You will both be taken care of. I promise.” He smiled, and she smiled back.

He stood still for another ten minutes, watching her vanish in the dark alley she came from, before he said, “Make it look like an accident. Be a good guardian to the kid.”

“Talha?” Dinçer cocked his head, eyes wary.

“I can’t let her live. A mother always wants the best for her kid. It’s only a matter of time before she comes to me again with a greater request. Then again and again. It will not stop. Eventually,

she will sell the information to those who pay better. I can't risk it. I'll keep my word and take good care of the kid. At least, he won't know the disgrace of his mother. Do it today."

"Count it done," Dinçer said, taking the wheel. "Where now?"

"Drive me to the maids who quit after that night, then we can go home."



**HIS BODY DIDN'T FEEL** like it belonged to him anymore; still, he welcomed exhaustion, as it left no room for thoughts about Slater. Falling into the bed that promised oblivion, he closed his eyes listening to the ringing silence. He still had a few hours before his meeting with Ifrīt. But the longer he listened, the more awake he became.

The dream refused to come, as even through the layer of plastic, Talha could feel Camilla glaring. Beyond exhausted, he lay on his bed, limbs stretched, concentrating on the notion of his spinning head. Even in the darkness, he knew the room was drifting around him, the walls shrinking with every rotation, as if wanting to squish him.

"Don't look at me like that..." He couldn't explain why he was talking to her or even keeping her head in his room, yet

somehow, he couldn't leave it anywhere else. "I'm sorry, but you are already dead. You are smart. You should understand. It's an opportunity, nothing more..."

"Who are you talking too?" The smooth, honeyed voice cut his monologue, sending a spasm down his body better than any electroshock.

"Do any of you know what privacy means?" Talha sat up, taking in the crouching form of the reaper.

"No, what's that?" Laughter rang in Savaş' voice, as a huge smile stretched his lips. The buckles snapped, as the ripper opened the freezer. "She is pretty. What did she do?"

Without hesitation, he picked up the head and stared into Camilla's eyes.

"Don't touch her, idiot. She is already prepared for forensics."

"Don't worry, Reis, I wear gloves. What did she do?"

"It doesn't matter," Talha frowned. "How did you enter?"

"You have a blind spot in your security system."

"A blind spot? Where?"

Ignoring him, Savaş pored over the dead eyes. He tilted her head left, then right, as if trying to solve the puzzle or read something in her face. "She must have done something to deserve such a death. How was it? Do you have pictures? I wonder how perfectly she fit into all the gore. Like a pearl, so pale..."

"Hands off her, Reaper," Talha growled, feeling the first bubble of anger bursting in his throat. "Why did you come? Where's Dincer?"

"Oh, jealous much? Don't worry, I mean no harm or disrespect. I came to collect your bride, why else? I figured why to wait till morning if I can come now." A leer in his voice tightened every one of Talha's nerves, instilling a thought about a gun into his head. He only had to slide his hand over the linens and under the pillow to grip the handle. "Let's make a deal, Reis. Tell me your love story. All of it, without anything to hide. If your story is good and truthful, I won't charge Dincer and I'll point out the blind spot in your security. If you lie, I'll kill you. Hmm? What happened to her?"

With a loud thud, the head dropped back into the fridge. The ripper straightened, looking at Talha.

*Fucking reapers...* Talha cracked his neck, getting up. *No respect. No privacy. No peace. I'm gonna break his jaw...*

“You are overstaying your welcome, and this is the last warning. Put her in the backpack and go away, or I’ll smash your pretty face against the table.”

“You find me pretty?” Savaş’ yellow eyes fixed on him as a weird, complex expression crossed his face. “You sleep with him, don’t you?”

With a cat-like grace and incredible speed, Savaş jumped forward. Hands connecting with Talha’s chest, they tumbled on the bed with the ripper on top of him.

“Why don’t you make a deal with me, Reis? For every three of your wishes, you’ll grant one of mine. I might ask for your life, or I might ask you to bring me an apple. It’s as simple as this.”

Cold fingers dug into his shoulders as the scarred face approached.

“Haven’t you said I have nothing to pay you with? “Talha rolled his eyes, finding himself in a painfully familiar situation.

“Maybe I was wrong. Maybe you do. Get rid of Slater, and I’ll serve you well. You won’t regret it. “

“What made you change your mind?” His pulse remained steady as he hurled his upper body to the side, attempting to shake the reaper off, but failed. Resting back, he heaved a sigh. “Would you get off, please? I don’t have the energy to wrestle with you...”

“The way you look at me. There is no pity in your eyes, and you don’t search for words. I like it. Also, you are deliciously immoral, yet, you keep your word, don’t you?” Talha laughed, wondering what was wrong with these rippers. Who fucked them up so badly, that they were so twisted? “Don’t laugh. Unlike Slater, I can be anything you want me to be. I grant wishes, Reis. In bed too. Do you know what it means?”

“Trouble?” Gathering all the strength left in his body, Talha shoved him aside. “Anyway, are you reapers or whores? Why are you so eager to spread your legs for me?”

“What do you mean, why?” On his knees, Savaş arched his black, perfect brow. “Right now, I’m just a ripper for you. You don’t care if I die or live. But if you sleep with me, it will get personal. If we bond, my failures will be yours. You will take care of me as

something that's yours." A frown clouded his features. "This is why you can't abandon Slater after everything he has done, isn't it? This is why I know you are sleeping with him."

"Okay, I don't know what's going on in your head, and, honestly, I'm too fed up with one reaper to want to deal with another. As you said, I have nothing to pay you with. I have already sold my soul to the devil."

"Your loss." Savaş' expression didn't change, as he shuffled away and slipped off the bed. "He can't be loyal, but I can. If I leave now, I won't offer it again."

"Go, ripper. Don't kill anyone, don't get seen, and don't forget to erase the security footage."

"Whatever..." With a smirk, Savaş picked up the fridge.

"Savaş... If I were you, I wouldn't offer this deal to anyone else."

With a smirk, Savaş left the room.

That night, Talha slept like the dead.



**SLATER GROANED, TEARING HIS** eyes open, but instantly closed them, shying away from the painfully bright daylight. When

he tried again, the bluish room he didn't recognize drifted before him, sucking on his stomach. Nauseous, Slater groaned again.

He tried to speak, but something held his tongue pinned down, and only a low whisper broke out from his mouth. Lifting his hand, he fumbled over his face. Fingers, finding a plastic device in his mouth, tugged on it; something rubbed against the back of his throat and a vomiting spasm hit him with a coughing fit.

Tears rushed out of his eyes, as his mouth overflowed with sour saliva. A vicious pain sprung beneath his right rib, making him writhe.

Gasping for air, he cast aside the long tube slick with bile and saliva, blinking through tears. Staying still for a moment, he couldn't remember ever feeling this broken, as every muscle seemed to solidify.

*Where is Slater?* The heavy thought barely moved in his cotton-filled head. He tried to call for Master, but his voice failed him, and only a croak vibrated in his chest. His mind, slowly coming around, remembered the street fight, the mosque, and Master's escape. His angry words and the bloody kiss.

Trying to calm his breathing, he closed his eyes, listening for his body to speak to him. His legs responded, but something unpleasant held the index finger of his left hand. The effort drained him of strength, but he lifted his hand and peeled the finger clip off.

A piercing noise perforated his head, forcing him to roll to the side in an attempt to get up, but he choked on air when a white pain wiped out everything, even the noise. Someone pulled him back, and within a moment, many hands covered his body, that he felt like vomiting. He hated being touched by people who weren't his master.

Hands forming fists, he squinted, concentrating on a mono-colored object among the sea of blue scrubs—an orange pen. Without thinking, he grabbed it and stabbed forward, but his attempt drowned in the air. His limbs felt weighted and his digits weakened as someone gripped his palm and tugged the pen out of his grip.

“No, you can't move.” The voice sounded familiar, so did the green glint of the glasses, but Slater couldn't remember where he'd seen the man. “You aren't ruining my beautiful stitchwork.”

“No... Slater needs to see Master. Slater needs to tell Master...” He pleaded before something tiny pierced his inner

elbow. Utter bitterness syringed into his mouth as the room plunged into darkness.



**“IN CASE YOU ARE CURIOUS,** he woke up,” Miraç’s voice, coming from the phone, sounded pleased.

“I’m not,” Talha said, but his pulse doubled its rate in excitement.

“He called for you, tried to break free, pulled the endotracheal tube out of his throat, and even attempted to stab a nurse with a pen,” Miraç kept going, ignoring Talha. “We had to sedate him.”

“I said, I don’t care.” Stabbing his canine tooth into his lower lip, Talha killed his smile. Despite Miraç’s concern that the blood loss might affect Slater’s organs or brain, the reaper seemed to be almost back to his usual self.

His chest lightened as if an invisible weight lifted from his shoulders, easing his breathing. *Why the fuck am I happy about it? This fucker will die anyway... I can’t forgive him. I can’t pretend that nothing happened, neither can the Hale Family.*

“I’m transferring him into a private room, where I can keep him sedated for a week. Then I’ll take him off morphine. By that



time, he should be healed enough to walk carefully.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Talha squinted as he entered the bathroom and switched the lights on. Turning left, he looked in a tall, mosaic mirror. His usually olive skin wore a grayish, ailing hint, black circles outlined his bloodshot eyes, and healing cuts and bruises covered his face. He sighed, feeling no better than he looked. Instead of relief, the night had brought exhaustion and rigidity into his limbs. His head already missed the softness of the pillow, but he didn’t have time to rest, as the conference would begin in five minutes.

“I say it because I won’t keep him against his will. I prefer him to stay for a month, but I won’t keep him tied to the bed if he wants to leave sooner.”

“Got it. I’ll think of something by that time. See you later, Doc.”

“Talha,” Miraç’s voice drubbed in his phone. “Take it easy, and don’t forget your medication.”

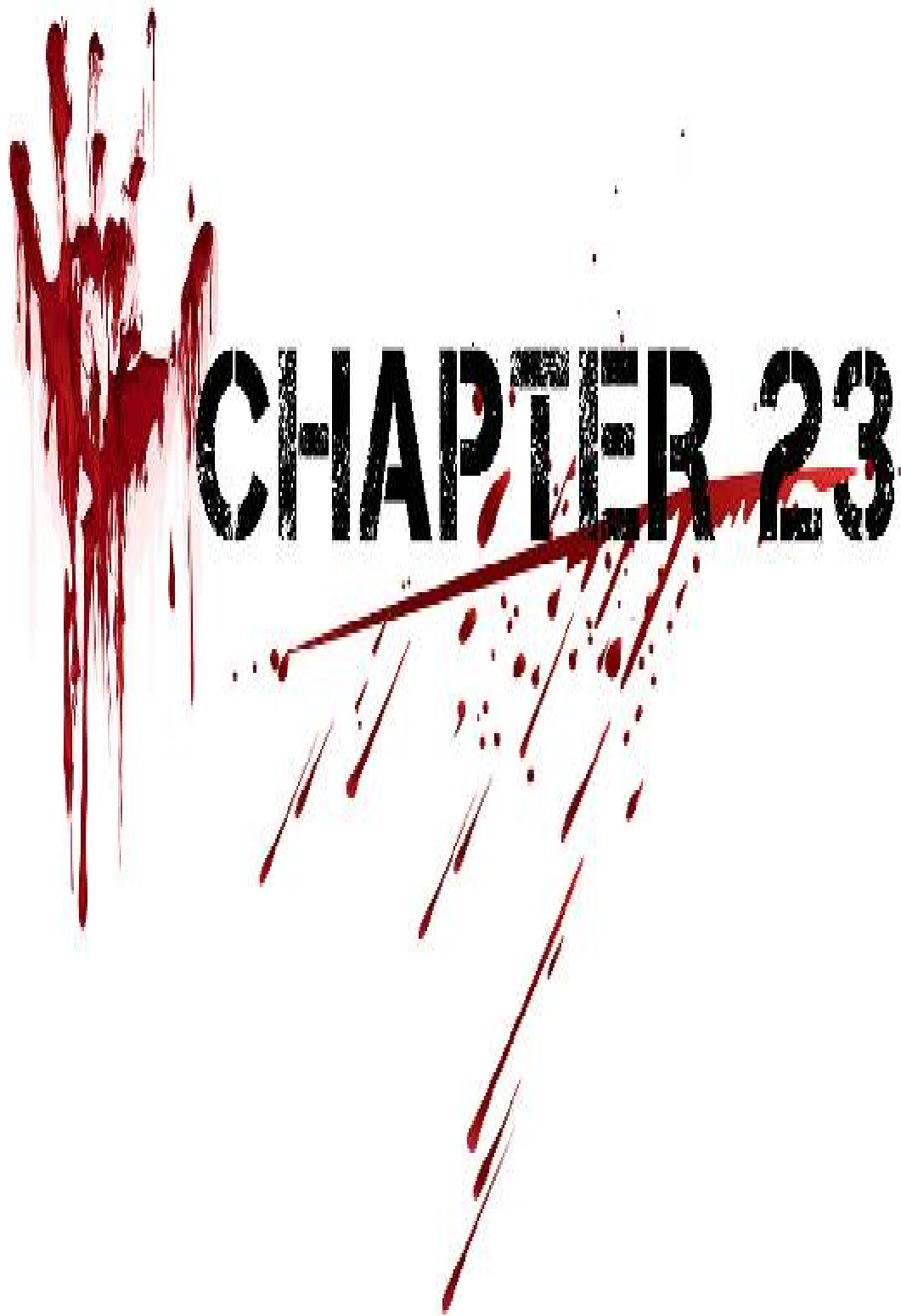
“Thanks, Doc...” Pushing the phone in his back pocket, he pressed his hands against the sink, Miraç’s words circling in his mind. *‘He called for you ... pulled the endotracheal tube out ... attempted to stab a nurse with a pen...’*

Talha snorted, hiding the stupid smile in his shoulder. *Damn, I’m fucked... What do I do with him?*

Pushing a long breath out, he shook off the merriment and strained his facial muscles into dark, serious determination. His jaw clenched adding an angry cast to his features. Tearing the top buttons of his shirt, he rolled up his sleeves, revealing the brownish, chafed skin around his wrists the rope caused. For a few breaths, he stared at his reflection, then sucked in a deep breath. *It’s time...*



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**“THANK YOU FOR COMING.”** Standing at the head of the U-shaped table, Talha looked over the crowd. Dressed in black, men and women kept silent, drilling him with their eyes. He instantly divided the crowd into jackals and lambs: those who were eating his

every expression with hungry, curious gazes and those who kept looking around rubbing their shoulders with shaky palms. There were also some who kept themselves hostile. He needed to win them over the most. "I'll be brief."

Black, heavy curtains framed the windows; the same black decorated the corners of Camilla's portrait that stood on his left. Her serious eyes fixed on the crowd. The portraits of the people who had died that night hung all over the wall, behind him.

*Dinçer is fucking good*, Talha appreciated the effort, wondering why he hadn't thought about it himself. Dozens of serious, accusing eyes must have made the people standing in front of him uneasy.

Ejder and Dinçer, standing on his either side, scanned the crowd with strained, cautious gazes, as Güvenç's soldiers bracketed the crowd from behind.

*That's it... Tell them what Slater did. That he was recruited by the Kılıç group and betrayed you. That he will be publicly executed. It's this easy. Everything will be solved.*

The words scraping his vocal cords, he croaked, "A few days ago the Kılıç group stormed my house and slaughtered my people and those from the Hale Family. Not only have they taken their lives, they..." Talha had to stop to clear his throat, as his voice became unrecognizable. "...mutilated their bodies and disgraced them in death, creating a bloody display for their amusement."

He filled his chest with air and pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes burning. Someone asked something, but he shook his head, never understanding the question.

"Reis is not going to answer your questions at the moment, as he has a serious medical condition that affected his hearing. It's only going to be a statement, so please, keep quiet," Dinçer butted in, and Talha gave him a nod of appreciation.

"About Iblīs..." Talha cleared his throat again. His statement was getting out of hand with every second. Not only did it not sound smooth and confident, it was choppy and rough. Yet, he still didn't say the most important part. Filling his lungs, he proceeded, determined to finish this all in one go, "The rumors you heard about Iblīs. They are false."

Ejder's glare burned his temple, but he chose to ignore it.

“Threatening my staff, the Kılıç group framed my ripper, forgetting that Iblīs doesn’t leave witnesses and never forgives those who wronged him.” The words gained confidence, as his voice empowered. He didn’t know where his words were coming from, but he didn’t care anymore as speaking became easier. “Me and my consultant, Slater, who the Kılıç group mistakenly took for Iblīs, were held hostage and tortured. Musa Kılıç tried to convert him. Realizing his mistake, he decided to kill him. At this moment, Slater is in the hospital in the intensive care unit, fighting for his life.”

The mumble ran across the hall, and Talha raised his palm, demanding silence.

“Not knowing what happened, my brother, Ejder, assumed that Slater betrayed me, so he put a contract on his head. When I escaped, the contract was canceled. Right now, Slater is receiving the best medical attention possible. His condition is stable.”

“What about Iblīs?”

Talha nodded his understanding.

“At the moment of the attack, Iblīs wasn’t present in the country. But he is now, and he’s not happy. It didn’t take him long to track me down and release us. If not for him, Slater and I would be dead. He is waiting for my command to track down those who disgraced me.” He turned to Camilla’s portrait, giving her a long, sad look. “Today in front of the dead, I swear that their lives would be avenged even at the cost of my own. The Kılıç group will pay for insulting me, robbing me of my future and the woman I intended to marry.”

With a short bow of his head, he finished, “That’s it for today. Now, excuse me.” With a lift of his chin, he pointed out of the window, and toward a motorcade of military jeeps, “Güvenç, let’s go. The Hale Family is welcome to join us.”



**“HOW DID I DO?”** Talha asked when the car pulled out of the gates and onto the driveway. The morning sun, breaking through the foliage of horse chestnuts growing on either side of the road, created an unpleasant flickering that jerked Talha’s every nerve. Shielding his eyes from the light, he looked away.

“Brilliant,” Dinçer’s smiling voice reached him from the driver seat. “I almost believed you.”

“You will burn in hell,” Ejder ground out from the seat next to him. His face wore a grim expression as he fiddled with his M4 Carbine. “I can’t believe you said it...”

“Thank you, Kardeşim.” Talha grinned. “Do you think they bought it?”

“If no, they’ll be persuaded once we raid the warehouse. They are following us.” Lifting his hand, Dinçer corrected the rearview mirror.

The sunbeam, glinting off Dinçer’s platinum watch, clawed at Talha’s sensitive eyes. Scrunching his face, he hid his eyes in his palms. With every minute, he felt nausea crawling into his body. The headache spread from his temples to his nape, setting his brain on fire.

“Perfect...” He rubbed his eyes, wondering what to do next. Taking the suspicion off Slater, he left an empty spot that now demanded to be patched. “Dinçer, I’m going to make a deal with Savaş...”

“What?” Dinçer and Ejder exclaimed with one voice. The car skidded as Dinçer gawked over his shoulder. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am.” Talha cracked his neck, hoping the movement would drain the pain from the back of his head. “Ask him to come and see me. Tonight.”

They spoke simultaneously, Talha’s head felt like splitting. Slamming his palm against the window, he ordered in a low voice that left no room for negotiation, “Shut up, both of you. It’s already decided. Now, I want silence.”

Thirty minutes later, Talha climbed out of the car and grabbed a compact assault rifle AM-17 from the trunk. From the corner of his eye, he saw Englishmen pulling up and littering the small parking lot. The stomping of many feet and metal clanging suffused the air, as soldiers, dressed in black military uniforms, surrounded the warehouse.

He nodded to Güvenç, ordering him to begin. Someone rushed to the doors, installing a small explosive device over the lock. The hand grenade, breaking the glass window, blew inside, and a boiling hail of lead ignited the air, stammering in Talha’s head.

Yanking the bolt of his rifle, he rushed inside, hoping that Ifrīt hadn’t played a joke on him.



**GUNFIRE STILL RANG IN HIS EARS** as he stood in the dark, cold room, surrounded by dead bodies and a sickening stench of blood and chemicals. His vertigo aggravated, and he needed a moment to slow down the constant spinning of the room.

People rushed past him in a blur, but he couldn't care less. His body felt sluggish, as mortal tiredness washed over him.

"Oh my fucking god..." Someone breathed by his side, dragging his attention. The young, blond Englishman from the Hale family reached into the refrigerator, and Talha had to grab his forearm to stop his fingers from touching Camilla's head.

"Don't touch her..." He managed. "...with bare hands."

Without looking in the huge refrigerator, stocked with meth, he wobbled toward the door. Sensing Camilla's glare on his back, he stumbled outside, needing air.

Shoving his rifle to Ejder's chest, he rested his hands on the roof of the car. The hot metal burned his skin when he doubled over and vomited. Spitting out the filthy taste in his mouth, he cringed, thinking that he should start taking the drugs Miraç gave him. The headache refused to abate, shredding his nerves, and seemed to be draining his body of life source.



“Talha?” Ejder touched his shoulder. “You look like shit... You should see Miraç.”

“I’m fine. Run the forensics. I want the official report before night falls,” Talha said, pulling the rear passenger door open and slumping into the seat. “I’ll rest when it’s over.”

But as soon as his head touched the backrest, a cold swamp of nothingness gulped him down.



**SITTING ON THE MEDICAL BED,** Talha stared at the cannula, stuck in his vein. “Seriously, I can’t stay here. I have no time for this.”

“You are staying. Miraç, tell him!” Ejder’s high-pitched voice sounded unbearable to Talha’s sensitive ears. He had to swallow to ease the pressure in his head.

“Ejder is right, Talha. I shouldn’t have let you go to begin with, so for the next week consider this home.” With a theatrical gesture, Miraç spread both hands, showing Talha his best room.

“One day, and then I’m out of here,” Talha compromised.

Propping up the door with his wide back, Dinçer yawned. “It’s better if you stay in the hospital. Everyone is talking about it now. A torture victim running around the city with a rifle is

suspicious enough. Now, they are starting to believe your story. You vomited then lost consciousness after you avenged your bride. Isn't it romantic?"

Dinçer searched for Ejder's support and received an enthusiastic nodding.

Talha cringed. "I'm pretending I didn't hear that."

"People think you are in a terrible state. Even the Hale Family, so stay in, and we will do the rest. What's left?"

"Savaş..."

Dinçer's face fell. "Don't do this. What else can you possibly want?"

"Execution..."



**WHATEVER MIRAÇ GAVE HIM** was working because even before sunset, Talha's head stopped hurting. His thoughts cleared, and the nausea abated, leaving him starving and bored. He hated hospitals. He hated the stupid gown that left his ass exposed to the wind and gazes. He hated feeling weak and requiring attention.

"Like hell I'm staying," he muttered under his breath. Tearing the hospital gown off, he threw his pants and shirt on, then opened the door.

For a moment, he considered going out for dinner, but his gaze fell on the familiar door across the corridor. He was on the same floor as Slater.

“Right,” he breathed, taking the first step toward Slater’s room.



**THE WEAKENING DRUG**, streaming in his veins, dry-cured his organs and initiated a maddening thirst. His tongue too dry and bloated to swallow. His throat was raw, and his whole body felt desiccated as if mummified alive. For the third time, whenever he’d opened his eyes, another injection of colorful nightmares infused into his system. In them, Master had always left him. In them, the opera ‘Ride of the Valkyries’ haunted him, stuck on a loop. Time after time, shrill violins sawed his brain to pieces, summoning demons. Red and black, they wore masks made from the faces of his victims. They sniggered, waltzing around him, as the music progressed to a mind-numbing crescendo. He hated this music as it attracted more and more demons. Hundreds of clawed hands seized his limbs, dragging him back while Master kept moving forward. No matter how hard Slater fought, how many demons he killed, he couldn’t break the demonic embrace and reach out to him.

Suffocating and gagging in powerless fury, he wrestled with the barbed wire of demonic claws, his skin ripping apart. In the next

instant, a soothing hand caressed his forehead, shooing them all away. Wide and cool, it smelled like bitter almond and leather. Like Master. Slater groaned. Chasing the sensation, he rolled his head after the hand and opened his eyes, but only bright, colorful stains greeted him.

“Master,” he heard himself croak; every syllable scratched his palate.

The hand retreated, unsettling his nerves.

Forcing through the drug-numbed pain and weakness, he lifted up, using his elbows as levers in a last attempt to regain the skin contact. The colorful flickers bled into the streaming light, coming from the corridor, illuminating the contours of Master’s face as another figure fell into the picture. Liquid ice washed over his spine, coating him in a cold sweat as he stared into the wolfish eyes, an amused smile playing over the mutilated face.

Slater blinked, trying to shake the nightmare off, but Savaş didn’t dissolve.

*No, Master can’t... Not him...* A jab of betrayal shot through him. His breathing hitched, as his head jerked to the side, unable to process the image. The chilling dread, radiating from his spine, seeped into his stomach, frosting him from inside.

Slater’s eyes latched onto Talha’s, as the man examined him with sad disappointment.

“Master...” Slater rasped, grabbed Talha’s hand, but Master sighed, shook off his grip, and stepped away.

“Miraç!” Talha called. A shadow in blue scrubs passed around Savaş, approaching the bed. “Sedate him.”

“No, Master. Slater needs to tell you something...” Slater gasped as the doctor pinned him down, secured his arm, and something prickled his inner elbow. Heat flared through his veins as a new dose of colorful nightmares rushed up to his brain. Darkness dressed in red, and the Ride of the Valkyries sounded again.

Blinking with heavy lids, Slater watched Master approach Savaş, slap his shoulder, and say, “Follow me, Ripper. I want to make a deal.”

*No, Master can’t... Please, don’t leave Slater...*

He blinked again, but this time his eyes refused to open.



**SAVAŞ SLUMPED ONTO** the medical bed and stretched his limbs across the crumpled bedsheet. His eyes disappeared in a wide yawn as he extruded a low, exhausted noise.

Leaning against the wall, Talha folded his arms over his chest, watching the ripper.

“What made you change your mind, Reis?” Prying one wolfish eye open, Savaş rolled to his side, every move dripping with laziness.

“Does it matter?” Watching the ripper now, he doubted Savaş could be useful. Delicate, slender, he had a fragile feel about him. Slater was lithe too, but he exuded danger and power with every breath he took, even when submitting. His iron muscles were for speed, not strength, still, they weren’t weak. Savaş looked weak.

“No-o-o, not really.” Savaş stretched the words rolling onto his belly. Propping himself on his elbows, he looked like a cat playing with a meal. “But what to do, Reis? I have already promised you that I won’t offer the deal twice. I can’t go back on my word, can I? What kind of a man would I be?”

“Can we skip this game and get straight to the price? I know you want something; otherwise, you wouldn’t offer me the deal. Why don’t you name your price?”

“Hmm... Fine. You want to talk business, here it is. You have three wishes. They can't be too complex. Nothing impossible like 'I want you to develop a channel to England' after what Slater did, is it clear? I'm a reaper, not god.” Savaş' words hardened with metal. “After I grant them, you will grant one of mine. No cheating, no renunciation. It's as simple as this. If you try to cheat your way out of the deal, I'll kill you.”

“Fair enough.” Talha nodded his agreement. “Once, my brother said that any of you can be Iblīs. Is that true? Can you do what Slater does? Do you know how to use karambits?”

Savaş wrinkled his nose. His eyes dimmed, as his attention shattered, and he picked up an orange pill bottle. Without any interest, he shook it in his hand, popped the lid open, then smelled the drug. The reply sounded lazy. “Yeah, yeah, I can use his savage weapon... I can do what he does, don't worry, Master.”

The title, Talha had grown used to hearing from Slater, sounded painfully wrong, cringe-worthy, coming from someone else.

“Don't call me that.” Talha corrected. “Use my name, it's fine. And give me your phone number, so I know how to find you if I need you.”

“I'm not staying with you?” Savaş' eyes narrowed as he put the lid back on the bottle and tossed it on the bed before scrambling to his feet.

“No, you aren't. You'll stay with Dinçer, as always. We will have a solely business relationship.”

“Why?” A deep line cut his porcelain forehead but instantly cleared. “Ah, I see. You aren't going to get rid of him, hmm? It's a bad idea. You can't have two rippers at once, Reis. It never works.”

“I'm not going to have two reapers at once,” Talha dodged. “And you should keep your mouth shut. I don't want people to talk about this, clear? If this is settled, give me your number and go.”

The ripper laughed, picked up a pen from the white nightstand near the bed, then skidded to Talha. Fingers sizzling hot, he flipped Talha's palm up, and a ballpoint slithered over his skin with a ticklish coolness.

“Here you go.” A warm gush of his breath washed Talha in a strong smell of oranges. “But you won't need it. I'll be around. You guard your assets, I guard mine. Now, wish well, Reis.”

Talha hummed, the familiar curiosity etching in his chest. Unlike Slater, Savaş didn't look simple in his desires. That made him guess what kind of wishes a man like him harbored. What could he possibly want?

Pulling his hand out of the ripper's grip, he plucked out a thin envelope from his back pocket. Folded twice, it was crumpled. "Go to my mansion, find his karambits, kill the target Iblīs-style. No witnesses. This is my first wish."

"Count it granted, Master." Ifrīt snapped his fingers in the air then ripped the envelope out of his hand.

The door closed behind Savaş. Talha stared at his hand, immediately wanting to wash off the ink. Pulling out his smartphone, he transferred the number, then froze, realizing it was the hand Slater had grabbed. He still could feel the icy touch of his shaking fingers beneath the thin, oscillated handwriting. Slater had looked vexed, afflicted. Never before had he acted this desperate unless he wanted to fuck.

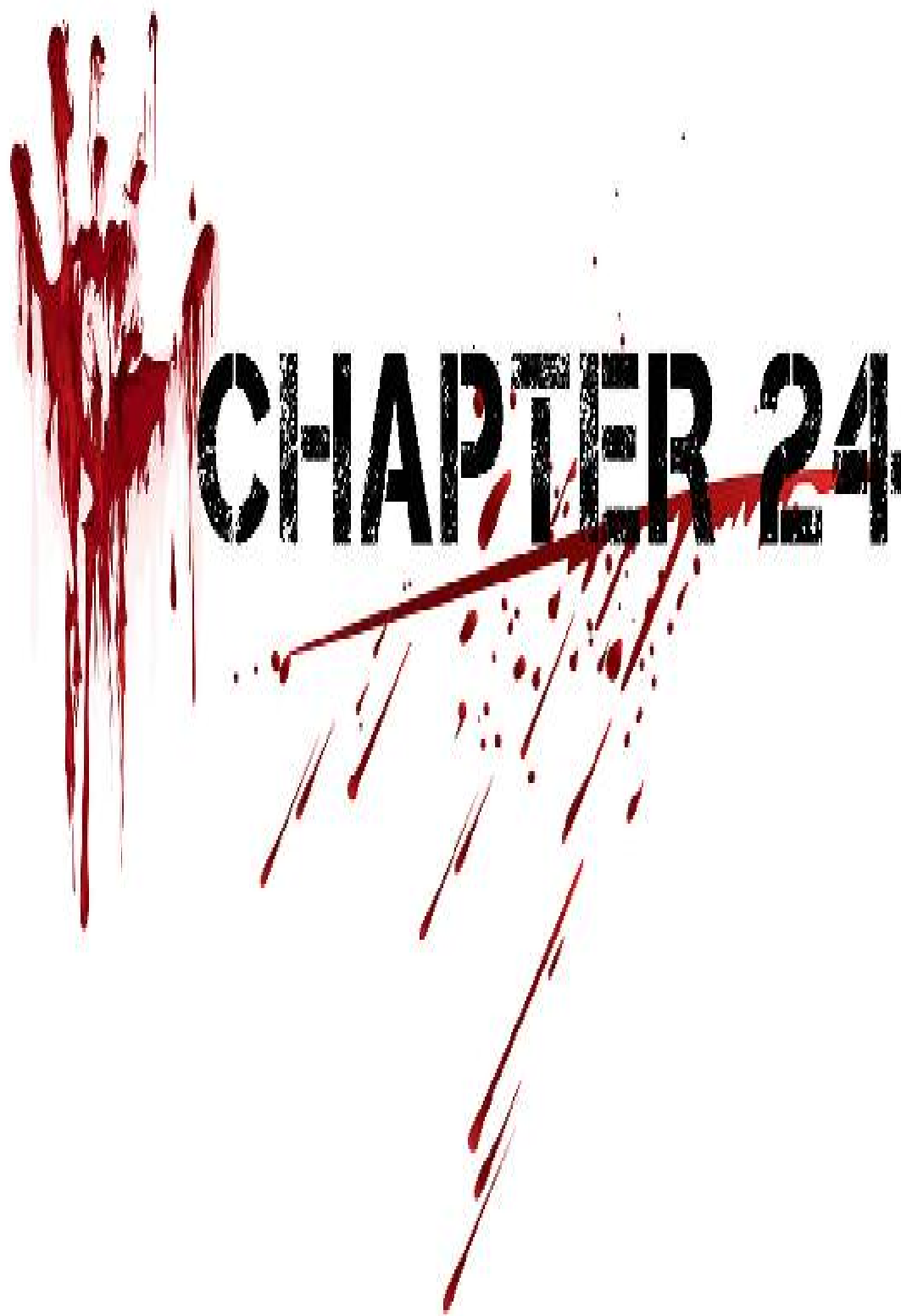
*What did you want to tell me?* He directed his question at his palm, but no answer was written on it. The feverish distress splashing behind Slater's eyes stood vivid in his memory, urging him to go see the ripper. He clenched his fist, trying to clear his head of unnecessary feelings, but it was harder than he'd imagined. "Fuck it!"

Storming out of the room, he barged into the doctor's lounge. "Miraç, get me some paint."



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**SLATER BLINKED INTO THE BRIGHT** morning light that streamed from out of the naked window. The unbearable smell of drugs and antiseptic slamming into his nose, forced him upright, but as soon as his abdomen contracted, he cringed and cupped his right

side with both palms. Dragging his gaze over the plastic wall down to the medical bed, he blinked again. A blue hospital gown loosely hugged his torso as linens of a darker hue covered his lower body. Jerking the cover away, he sat and rolled up the gown, but as soon as his gaze found the tight bandage that wound around his torso, his head snapped to the side. A rush of memories spun before his eyes.

The small, dark chamber... Camilla's severed head... the revolting stench of death... the blood and murder that brought no relief... the stinging slap his master granted him.

Palm darting up, he fingered his cheek. Covered with a few days of stubble, it scraped his finger pad, but no pain pulsed under his touch.

"Was it a dream?" Slater scratched behind his ear, rummaging in his memory. He remembered his dreams, the hell full of demons, the music, then Master and Savaş. His whole being rebelled against the memory. "Master wouldn't. It must be a nightmare. Master is still there, under the mosque... Slater needs to go."

His feet slapped against the cold floor even before he realized he darted toward the door. His feet wobbly as his hand reached for the handle, but something on the floor captured his attention. He dropped his gaze as his foot stepped on a white line, painted in front of the door. He halted, then flinched back.

*'Do not cross this line,'* was written above in painfully familiar handwriting. Slater swallowed, inched forward, squinted, then recoiled, stung with the pain of betrayal. Gawking about the room, he searched for cameras but found none, his palm tightly pressed to his side.

"No. Master can't do this." He grounded his teeth, tilted his head to one side, then to another before placing his toes over the line. Still wet, the paint stuck to his skin, gluing his toe to the blue tile floor. Jerking his head away, he spun on his heels, letting out a guttural roar of dissatisfaction. Storming toward the window, he peeked out.

His heart sank.

The blinding sun lavished the dusty road that rolled out in three directions, about fifty feet beneath him. Yanking the window open, he scanned the wall on his left, then right, but found nothing to use to climb down. But even if there was anything to grip, Slater lost

confidence in his strength. Sweat beaded on his forehead as the pain throbbed inside from merely getting out of bed.

“No. Master can’t!” He slammed his palm against the windowsill as anger flooded his heart. Storming through his veins, it demanded he escape. “Slater won’t stay in. This is stupid.”

He stumbled to the door but stalled as soon as his toes crossed the line. The pain beneath his right ribs grew stronger with every move he took, enraging him. With a roar, he grabbed the plastic chair that stood near his bed and smashed it against the wall, then lifted the bed, intending to flip it over, but gasped with suffocating pain.

“Could you please stop this act of vandalism?” The calm, familiar voice syringed a new dose of irritation into Slater’s system, making him spin and growl. “If you keep acting like this, you’ll scare the nurses, and they will refuse to bring you food. Lie down, please. Let me see your stitches, and don’t lift heavy objects unless you want to prolong your stay for a few weeks.”

Dumbfounded, Slater scrunched up his face, trying to remember the doctor’s name. *Miraç?*

Senses heightening, Slater tugged the air into his lungs, but the man didn’t reek of fear, in complete opposite, he smelled like security. Calm and confident, he picked up the chair and returned it to its place, taking a seat.

“Where is Master?” Slater hissed, his unsettled nerves demanded he kill.

“Left this morning.” *Miraç* straightened the bed and patted the covers. “Please, lie down. I can see you want to kill me, but you can do that after you’ve healed.”

Slater didn’t know why, but for the first time in his life, he obeyed someone who wasn’t his master. Crawling onto the bed, he nestled his broken body on a pillow, closing his eyes to collect the shards of his energy and pacify the tearing pain in his side.

Undoing the top lace of his gown, *Miraç* revealed the upper side of Slater’s body, then removed the bandage.

“You are lucky you’re alive. The knife scratched your liver.” His feather-light touch tickled Slater’s side, raising bumps all over his skin. Slater glanced down at the ugly, fresh scar. Black threads sticking out of the wound resembled bug legs. *Ugly...*

“When will Master be back?”

“You are healing well!” Miraç grinned, flashing with white teeth. Slater considered fisting his hair and slamming that smiling face against the nightstand to make the praying spot on his forehead bloody. “Please, take it easy or the stitches won’t hold. Do you need to pee yet? The catheter was removed only an hour ago, so...”

“Slater asked, when Master will return.” Fighting pain, Slater brought his face forward, boring into the tranquil brown eyes. The lack of fear was insulting, and Slater wondered if he presented such a weak and miserable state that Miraç didn’t consider him a threat.

“He didn’t say. But he left something for you.” Two fingers dove into the chest pocket and tugged out a piece of paper. Slater snatched it before Miraç could offer it. With a neurotic movement, he unfolded the sheet and peered at the single line.

*‘If you leave, don’t come back.’*

“What does it mean?” Slater asked, his lips cold and unresponsive.

“Please, don’t kill anyone, okay?” Miraç leaned away in the chair, holding his palms up. “If you stay, one day he’ll come for you. He didn’t say, but if you wish to leave, no one will stop you.”

“No...” Slater shook his head, unable to accept his punishment. It was worse than the basement. At least, in the basement, he knew Master would be coming for him. In the basement, he could tug a safety bolt out and release himself at any moment, knowing he could go and see Master. Here, he felt buried alive. “Slater wants to see Master...”

“I’m sorry, buddy,” Miraç gave him a cautious smile. “The faster you heal, the sooner he’ll come for you. But after everything you’ve done, this may be your only chance.”

“My only chance?” Slater cocked his head, trying to understand those eyes, full of concern.

“To escape capital punishment. You don’t expect him to forgive you after everything you’ve done, do you? Talha is understanding, but no one is this tolerant. She was his bride, yet you are still alive. You must be special to him if he gives you this option. Don’t waste it—leave the country while you still can.”

Slater’s eyes refused to blink as the realization dawned upon him, coating him in chilling sweat.

*Master will kill Slater?* The thought ricocheted in his skull, never absorbing into his mind. It felt foreign as if it didn't belong in his head, therefore he didn't believe it. "No, Master won't."

*If Master wanted to kill Slater, Master would have done it in the mosque...*

"Anyway," Miraç got up, his hands wrapping the fresh bandage around Slater's chest. "I gotta go. Please, don't kill anyone. Drink in small portions. The bathroom is behind that door. No showering. If you need assistance, press this button."

The doctor exited, leaving behind the gagging smell of hand sanitizer. Floundering in the ocean of his disturbed thoughts, Slater stared ahead with unseeing eyes.

"Master wants to get rid of Slater..." He whispered, still unable to process the thought. It felt like a joke, because no matter what Slater had done, Master always forgave him, always took care of him. "Master won't kill Slater, or he wouldn't be kissing Slater. Miraç is wrong. Slater will wait for Master and ask."

With that resolve, he slipped down on the linens until he sprawled on his back. His breathing short and shallow as jolts of pain surged beneath his ribs. The bedsheets absorbed his sweat in minutes and stuck to his skin, but he didn't care.

"Slater will wait for an hour. Slater can wait. It's okay. If Master doesn't come, Slater will leave. Just one hour."

Hours passed by, but Master didn't come. His anger morphed into distress then despair. Sinking his nails into his stomach, below the bandage, Slater scratched his skin. Red lines darkened with effort, turning bloody and raw.

"Slater should leave. Master must have forgotten. Master is busy. Slater will come to Master. It's okay."

His fingers traveled up his neck and pressed to his mouth, where the elusive memory of a painful, bloody kiss still lingered. To reinforce it, he sank his canine tooth into his bottom lip. The skin broke, and blood flooded his mouth. Sucking on it, he tormented the cut more, to feel the pain. The one Master gave him.

"No." He gulped down the coppery taste. "Slater should be good. Master didn't abandon Slater. Master will come. Master left a message. Master kissed Slater. Master must be busy. Slater made him really busy..."

But with time, his resolution shattered. The first star crawled up into the dimming sky. Neighboring with the brightening moon, it reinforced his restlessness. The night called for him like it called a wolf. It stirred a growl at the back of his throat, making him want to howl his distress.

“Slater wants to see Master. Why isn’t Master coming? Slater needs to see Master. Does Master hate Slater now?”

Hugging his middle, Slater slumped to his side. His mind emptied as his eyes focused on the golden line of light, streaming from under the door. Every time a shadow cast over it, he held his breath, but shadows kept passing by, filling his soul with cold loneliness.

Talha didn’t come the next day. Like a caged animal, Slater paced his way up and down, until pain and fever forced him back to his bed. The broth, he was allowed to drink, didn’t fill his stomach, and there were no sweets to calm his nerves. Thrown to the lions of his memory, Slater wallowed in feverish delirium, remembering every small detail about Master. His smell, his touch, the small sounds he produced while sleeping. Those memories shredded his soul, making him want to break the order and go see Master.

Twice, while using the bathroom, Slater almost collapsed. Repulsed by his own weakness, he started understanding why Master wouldn’t come. No one needed a weak assassin. No one needed someone like Slater now. Miraç had said that Master would come when he healed. It made sense. Talha wouldn’t waste his time on someone weak and helpless. *If Slater can’t heal, Master will move on.*

The thought stabbed his brain with a vivid memory of Savaş’ smiling face.

“Did Master close the deal with Savaş?” The thought opened a vent of hatred. Black and sticky, it flooded his core, instilling the need to crush everything and everyone on his path, until he found Master. Still, the invisible wall stopped him from crossing the white line whenever he approached.

Succumbing to his agitation, he jumped Miraç, aiming to kill, but didn’t, fearing that Master would never come if he did.

With every day spent in the small room, he was losing his hopes and patience. Many times, he was ready to leave. Many times, he got angry and tossed things around, got dressed, determined to go

and see Talha, but every time his foot touched the line, the handwritten words shackled him better than any leash.

*What if Master doesn't want Slater after all?*



**A WEEK PASSED SINCE** Talha returned home. His nausea varied. At times it abated, leaving him energetic and clear-minded for hours, but it eventually slammed back into his guts with a violent coughing spasm when he least expected it.

The conflict with the Hale Family had resolved without his presence. After finding traces of Musa Kılıç's sperm in Camilla's mouth, the Hale Family went berserk on the Kılıç group. While Istanbul wallowed in a blood feud, Talha watched time drip from the tall IV stand and stream into his veins, stretching his days and filling his mind with thoughts of Slater.

Savaş' work with the karambits completely removed the bullseye from Slater's forehead, as Musa Kılıç was found dead, cut into pieces and fed to his guard dogs. His severed head was stuffed in a freezer with his chopped off genitals in his mouth. Despite Slater's weapon and a similar style, the forensics report showed differences. Unlike Slater, who preferred to work on living victims, Savaş recreated Iblīs' work on a dead body, after slitting Musa's throat. Still, Talha didn't complain. A small 'donation' altered the

report, removing the traces of the copy-cat work from it. Very few were interested in digging into Musa's death, and after the corrections, there was nothing anyone could find anyway, even if they looked.

His problems were melting, yet the reason for his main distress remained. Miraç's constant updates didn't help. On the contrary, they provided his bored mind with strong visuals of the ripper. He couldn't help imagining Slater flinching every time someone entered his room and how the light died in his eyes as he realized it wasn't Master.

A tiny part of him missed Slater, but the other half of his soul was inhabited by pride and wounded dignity. That part craved to see Slater suffer, if not dead.

"Fuck it!" Rolling and tossing on a leather sofa, Talha growled, as his body refused to get comfortable in any pose. Muscles shrieking their protest against a horizontal position, he sighed and got to his feet, shuffling out of the library.

Dead and desolate, his mansion once again felt foreign to him. Not a single sound disturbed the oppressive silence, as not a single soul remained inside. Once again, he was alone in his mansion, fearing Slater's outrage.

*Maybe I should follow Ejder's advice and sell it, after all.* He thought, cutting the air with his hand to disturb the thin net of dust that hung in it. Swirling away from his hand, the particles glittered in the sunlight.

That was yet another reason for him to get rid of Slater. He knew that after what had happened here, he would never feel comfortable with people staying under the same roof with Slater. More than that, now he had Savaş. The boy was way more cooperative, and Talha often found himself thinking that he didn't need two rippers.

Talha didn't know how Dinçer had settled his accounts with Savaş, but whenever the ripper was mentioned his friend paled a fraction. Still, even knowing that with every step he was getting bogged down in a game he didn't understand, Talha didn't fear Savaş' wish. He wasn't scared to pay, except he couldn't tell what he was paying for anymore, because he had decided that Slater should die long ago.

*Ejder is right; I'm not right in my head.*



Climbing the marble stairs, he froze in front of the Grand Hall. Scanning the interior, he felt remorse scratching in his chest. Petty, at first, it clawed at his organs, pulling him inside. He had avoided this place for days, along with the decision, but now he thought that the hideous memories could help him shake off the nostalgia and see Slater for what he was, not what Talha wanted him to be.

His bare feet slapped against the marble floor as he advanced into the room. He stopped before Camilla's portrait, looking into her eyes. But instead of her beautiful features, he saw the severed head, maimed with death and covered with greenish spots.

Hand, running over the top of the frame, removed the thin layer of dust. To distract himself from the memory, he glanced at the gray covering his tips, then rolled the dust between them until it formed a few tiny balls. Dropping them to the floor, he sighed.

*This can't go on...* His eyes raking around the vastness as he mourned the potential this room once held. Now it was forever robbed of its purpose and would never be used to host special occasions again. It would forever remain a mausoleum and a reminder of his carelessness, crushed dreams, and abortive future.

A strong emotion ripped through his chest setting his skin on fire, but he held his breath, pocketing it, as he had no mental capacity to process it now. Getting mad would solve nothing anyway.

"The graveyard of my ruined toys?" He repeated Slater's words, tasting them, dissecting them. Bitter and harsh, they slashed through his throat with a shard of accusation. At that moment, paranoia awoke at the back of his head, as every portrait seemed to be glaring at him.

Every cell in his body demanded he leave, but he kept looking at the serious faces, trying to memorize them, until his gaze connected with Zaal's. They had never been friends, but for five years Zaal had been his constant companion. They didn't have much in common, they rarely talked, but they ended up sharing one burden—Slater.

Looking into Zaal's black eyes, he couldn't help wondering, where the chain of his mistakes had started. Was it when he'd closed the deal with Iblīs? The way he had treated Slater? Or the moment he hired Zaal, wanting to delegate a part of his responsibilities to someone else? Talha didn't know.



## **5 YEARS AGO**

**IT'D BEEN TWO MONTHS** since Talha sent Ejder to Mardin. Two months of prosperity, where Slater's single visit to Iran settled a problem with an independent military group, who had decided that they were big enough to fix a price all over the Golden Crescent<sup>[22]</sup>. Two months full of struggle, where every day started with Slater sleeping by his side. Trying every approach possible, Talha finally gave up, realizing that Slater spoke only one language—the language of violence and domination because as soon as Talha lowered his guard, Slater's behavior would turn pushy, overwhelming, threatening.

Still, with every passing day, Talha was growing used to Slater's constant presence. Like a dog, Slater followed him everywhere. Like a dog, he demanded a lot of attention, took no responsibilities, and had no shame or guilt. Soon enough, Talha realized that it was easier to treat Slater like a pet, rather than a lover; on some level, this realization allowed him to accept their sexual encounters. Slowly and reluctantly, Talha was growing used to Slater's body, as his hand dared to explore new regions. But even though they had had sex many times, it had never been tender and didn't include kisses. Still, Talha's needs for female bodies thinned out.

“Stop eating sweets all the time, you will get diabetes before you’re forty,” Talha said, as soon as he entered his bedroom, his eyes examining the ripper’s frame with disapproval.

“Huh? Slater won’t live that long.” The ripper grinned. His half-naked, sinewy frame stretched over his bed, as he kept stuffing his face with locum, the sugar powder scattering over the dark-blue linens. The predatory glow settled behind his pupils as Slater stopped chewing for a moment. “Why? Could it be that Master is worried about Slater?”

“You are my asset. If you get sick, I’ll have to replace you. It’ll be a hassle.” Blowing the gush of irritation out, Talha marched to the bed and snatched the paper box out of Slater’s hands. “How many times did I tell you not to eat in my bed? Change the linens.”

In a split second, Slater jumped to his feet, swirled around Talha, and snatched the box back. His fingers dove in and reappeared with a transparent yellow cube, dusted in white powder. “Want some?”

“No.” Pushing the ripper away from his path, Talha came to the closet and fished out a clean, white shirt, underwear, and a new tie. Tossing it over his forearm, he strolled toward the bathroom.

Slater licked his fingers and put the box aside. Voice prickling with concern, he asked, “Where are you going?”

“I have a meeting tonight. A Syrian group that’s interested in recruiting Güvenç’s army,” Talha said, before closing the door behind him. The hurried footfalls boomed from behind, making Talha wince. The door swung open as Slater barged in.

“Slater is coming with you.”

“No. Slater is staying home.” Hanging the clothes on a hook, he faced the reaper.

“Slater wants to go.” The protest bared Slater’s teeth in an aggressive grimace.

“No. Not after the last time.” Tugging the tie off his neck, Talha tossed it aside; his shirt followed.

The reaper’s voice changed, turning velvety-soft. “Slater was wrong, Master. Slater won’t do that again.”

“I’ve heard it before. You aren’t going. This is an important meeting, and I don’t want you to fuck it up.” Turning away from the reaper, Talha kept undressing. “Go away.”

“Slater said, Slater was sorry.” The tone changed again, becoming aggressive. “Slater won’t do that again. Why is Master still mad?”

“Because you always break your word. You make people uncomfortable. You aren’t supposed to be present in meetings like this. Why do you even want to come? There is no reason for you to be there.” Reaching for the belt, Talha hesitated, not willing to strip and entertain the reaper.

“To protect Master.”

*That means you are bored...* Talha thought, but said, “From whom? No one is threatening me. And you are a reaper, not a bodyguard; I prefer it to stay this way. Moreover, there’ll be Güvenç’s people, so as you see, I don’t need your protection. Now, step out of the bathroom, I’d like to shower.”

To his surprise, Slater left, but ten minutes later, the fully dressed figure of the reaper waited for him in the parking lot.

“Slater is going, Master.” The reaper grinned, and Talha checked his watch. There was no time left for a fight, as Slater would follow anyway.

“Fine, but no weapon. Disarm, now.”



**THE NIGHT SCATTERED** colorful lights over the two-millennia-old city, outshining the barely recognizable Milky Way, and the slim crescent of the moon. Escorted by two jeeps, occupied with armed men, Talha didn't bother looking around, as his attention was consumed by Slater. Unable to sit straight, the reaper kept squirming on his seat, obviously feeling naked without any weapons. Talha smiled as sparks of satisfaction warmed his chest. If he couldn't leave Slater home, at least he could make him uncomfortable.

Dinçer kept stealing curious glances through the rear-view mirror, but Talha couldn't voice the reason for his amusement.

They parked among military jeeps that belonged to Güvenç's people, in front of a small bar with a roof terrace. Giving the soldiers a once over, Talha nodded his appreciation. Toned and disciplined, they scattered over the perimeter, securing the restaurant. Curiosity to see them in action gnawed at him, but deep down, he already knew that choosing Güvenç had been the right call.

Exchanging a few nods and handshakes, Talha directed his feet toward the entrance when he noticed three Land Rovers parked on the other side of the parking lot. Heavy, with solid tires, they looked enchanted, bullet-proof.

"I assume they have already arrived?" Talha shot a glance at the lit windows, then at Slater. The reaper swayed to and fro on his toes. His eyes examined the armed men with a challenging look as if he was ready to fight anyone who wanted to contend him.

*Like a fucking dog...* Lips quivering in a smile, Talha palmed the reaper in his chest. "You stay here. If you go upstairs, I'm going to be very upset. Understand?"

"No, Slater goes with Master," Slater gnashed out, made a first step toward the entrance, but a tall, wide shadow crossed his path.

"Haven't you heard what Reis said? Back off!" A muscular, tall man, dressed in a black military uniform, confronted Slater. Stepping toward the reaper, the man jerked the muzzle of his automatic gun pointing Slater to a table on the first floor. "Sit there and wait, as Reis said."

*Interesting!* It's been a while since someone captured Talha's attention. Usually, people instinctively avoided Slater, sensing the danger in him. This man looked fearlessly stupid, therefore captivating.

“What’s your name?” Talha found himself asking as he examined the stranger’s eyes. Immobile, black, with barely recognizable pupils, it was impossible to tell where they were looking.

“Zaal, Reis.”

“Zaal, huh. You aren’t Turkish, are you?”

“No, Reis. Georgian.” The low voice sounded cautious this time, as the wide mouth reduced to a slit.

“I’ll give you a thousand Euros if you manage to keep this one in check. He must not go upstairs.” With a careless lift of his chin, he pointed at Slater. “Can you do that?”

“Absolutely, Reis.” Zaal grinned, as his eyes and his muzzle fixed on Slater. “Don’t worry.”



**THREE HOURS LATER**, when the dinner was over, and the deal with the Syrian crime group was finalized, Talha stumbled down the stairs. To his surprise, Slater still sat on the assigned chair. Gun on the table, Zaal sat opposite to him. Their hard eyes fixed on each other, as vehement hatred, exuding from the pair, condensed the air.

No one had ever managed to make Slater sit for three hours in a row without chaining him. Watching the rare picture, Talha

thought that he could use a bodyguard like Zaal, as well as with a baby-sitter for his psychopathic assassin.

“Did you have fun?” Approaching the reaper, Talha slapped Slater’s shoulder. Jumping to his feet, Slater glared, indignation splashing in his pale eyes. “Good. Get in the car.”

Turning to Zaal, he gave him a once over. Talha rarely misjudged people. The man looked impressive and serious. Yet, he gave out the vibe of a private person. Someone who wouldn’t run his mouth. “Do you have family, Zaal?”

Hands clasped behind his back, the man barked, “No, Reis.”

“Would you like to work for me? I need a bodyguard and someone to keep that guy in check.”

Wide mouth stretching in a huge smile, Zaal got up from his seat and drawled in his pointy accent, “At your servize, Reis.”



## **PRESENT**

**A WEAK SMILE CURLED** the corners of his lips upon remembering Slater’s outrage. After storming through the house and tossing things against walls, he’d demanded a contract then disappeared for three days.

Looking back in time, Talha thought that it was a miracle that Slater hadn't killed Zaal sooner, because he hated the man with his whole soul.

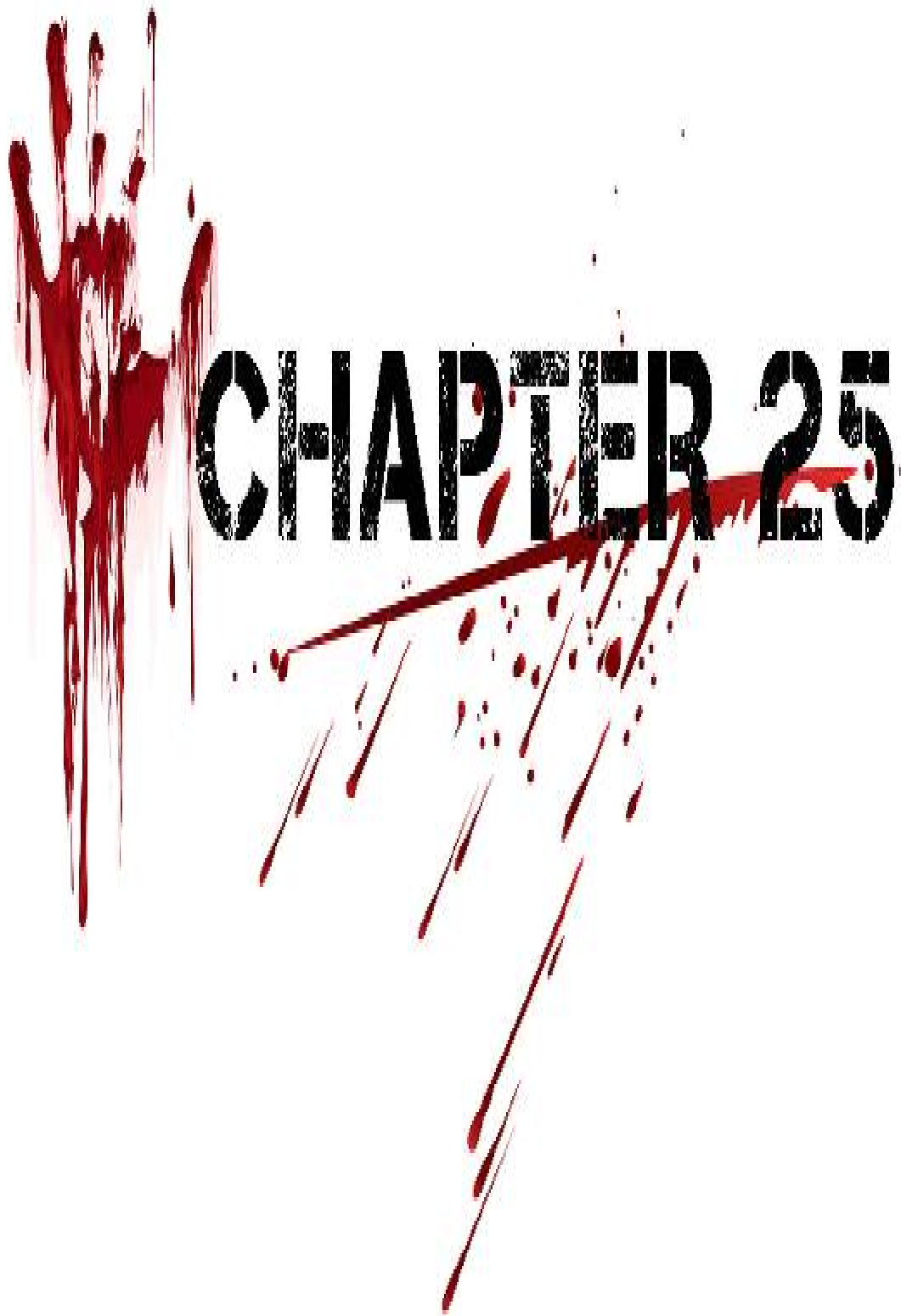
At that moment, a very arrogant thought stirred at the back of his head, making him feel a little bit happy: *Was it because I told him not to?*

The memory dispelled, leaving him eye to eye with the photo of Zaal. His black eyes, usually immobile, now forever frozen in an unseeing gaze forward.





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**A WEEK OF ANGER**, where Slater itched to slaughter everyone, bled into a week of desperation. His wound had healed enough to walk without breaking into sweating and panting every five minutes, but his heart was bleeding out with the painful need to see his

master. On the third week, he stopped using the bed. Lying on the floor by the line, he imagined himself sleeping by Master's side. His fingers constantly trailed the white paint, as he remembered the feel of Talha's skin. At the moments of anger outbursts, he furiously scratched the line with his nails as if it had some magical power to keep him locked in and as soon as the pictogram was ruined, he would be released. But even though the scratches appeared, the spell never broke.

With every day, the harrowing feeling that Master abandoned him settled deeper into his bones, stripping him of will. Deep down, he already knew what Talha was trying to achieve, but he had a hard time accepting it.

*If Master closed the deal with Savaş, he doesn't need Slater anymore. He must be so revolted with Slater that he doesn't even want to come and kill me. The lazy thought wriggled its way into his mind, stirring fear. What if Master never comes? Will Slater die here? Is this what Master wants? For Slater to disappear? Or is Master scared to face Slater?*

Remembering the stinging slap he'd received in the mosque and the offered karambit, Slater didn't believe it.

*No, Master isn't scared, or he would have killed Slater long ago. Master didn't even bother to put up guards. So careless... or smart?*

Slater gulped down the bitter saltiness of his spittle, knowing that Miraç was right. Talha wanted him to leave. Talha didn't want him anymore, and this was the last act of kindness Master granted him. Or was it cruelty? Slater couldn't tell anymore.

*No, Master. You are wrong. Slater won't run. You'll have to come and see Slater, because Slater is going nowhere. You will have to come and tell Slater to go away. This is low, Master. At least look Slater in the eye when you tell Slater you don't want him anymore...*

But despite his determination, the floor felt colder as time flew by.



**TALHA'S EAR HAD HEALED** so had his concussion. Even Camilla's funeral, that had happened two days ago in London, felt distant as if months had passed. Falling back into his routine, Talha once again reassessed the damage Slater had done, as the gate to England shut in front of his nose. The Hale Family didn't officially hold a grudge, yet they didn't want anything to remind them of the tragedy that had happened to their beloved daughter. Talha saw through this bullshit, realizing that once Camilla was gone, the organization changed hands, which inevitably altered its goals.

Seeing no point in mourning the ruined opportunity, Talha concentrated on his country and his life, but even this didn't hold his attention for long, as without the Kılıç group and Slater, things were running smoothly.

Savaş had stopped by a few times. He didn't talk much, making it nearly impossible to understand his reasons. Taking a distant place, he could spend hours watching Talha go about his business. Talha didn't care. Life with Slater stripped him of the ability to get shocked or surprised. Also, it didn't look like the reaper had anything particular in mind, more like he was bored.

Keeping himself busy, Talha directed the course of his thoughts toward the future, wanting to abandon Slater to the past. Nevertheless, whenever exhaustion took over, his concentration

slipped, weakening his self-control and small memories started flickering before his eyes, bringing forward unwanted thoughts about Slater.

Miraç's regular updates didn't help him forget the reaper either, as they painted in his mind a very satisfying picture of a suffering Slater. Part of Talha yearned to punish the reaper, to make him suffer even more. Another one wished for the reaper to disobey the order and disappear, so Talha would never have to deal with him again. But there was the third, tiny fraction of his soul that rejoiced, as Slater staying in the hospital room meant that Talha's word wasn't an empty sound to the reaper's ears.

But the longer he avoided dealing with Slater, the more he understood that it couldn't go on forever, as patience wasn't Slater's strongest quality. Sooner, rather than later, he would get tired of waiting and kill everyone in the hospital, as he wouldn't be able to cope with his irritation and a growing need to kill.

*One more week. I'll wait for a week. If he won't leave, I'll kill him.*



**THE WORLD LOST ITS COLORS**, turning his days into bleak nothingness. The hospital food, that had never appealed to Slater, now revolted him. He stopped eating. Bored and disappointed, he

was falling into the abyss of an emotional vacuum he'd tried to escape all his life. Without any information, without pleasure, Slater felt his soul turning into stone. Even the rare sweets Miraç sneaked into the hospital didn't excite him anymore and tasted no better than cardboard.

The need to break the neck of the annoying nurse who kept bursting into the room and hitting him with the door grew stronger, but Master wouldn't appreciate him making a mess. He didn't train, barely slept, but kept shaving, showering, and dressing, hoping that one day Master would come. The arctic frost, settling into his bones, constantly reminded him of the warmth of his master's body, instilling in his head a single question, '*Did Master throw Slater away?*'

However, even if he answered 'yes', he didn't know what to do next. It wasn't hard to find a master, but it was nearly impossible to find a good one who would satisfy all his needs. The one who would always take care of him, protect him, and clean his mess. Who would forgive him no matter what he did. Talha had been it. Talha had been everything Slater needed, up until now. Finding good master material and building up a new master would take years, and Slater didn't want to bother. He loved Talha's scent, the feeling of his large hands upon his body, and that consideration in Master's eyes when Talha tried to understand him.

"I miss Master..." He breathed. *Did Slater fuck this up?*

He needed to ask Talha, so he kept waiting.



**THE DOOR, OPENING**, scraped his back. Pain enraged, Slater rolled away ready to kill the nurse. He lifted his upper body, looking at the door, and his heart leaped into his throat. His chest so tight that air stuck in his lungs, refusing to leave. He swallowed, reached forward, but his trembling fingers stopped an inch away from Talha's beige linen pants.

"M-Master?" His voice broke, as he couldn't believe his eyes. He blinked, then again, but the vision didn't disappear. Talha looked good. Dressed in the casual clothes and with his hair tossed to the side he looked younger. Refreshed and clean-shaved, he smelled like home. Slater inched further, but Talha stepped away, and his shaky fingers clasped in the air.

"Follow me." Metal jiggled in Master's voice, turned blood in Slater's veins into liquid ice.

"Master?" Getting to his knees, he fidgeted. Their eyes met. The blood drained from Slater's face, as Talha's amber glare was colder than ever before.

"Don't talk." Void of emotion, Talha's voice came out flat. Slater reached into his memory to replay it and analyze the intonation, but Talha strolled down the corridor.

Dread snaked down his spine and curled in his stomach, making him believe that as soon as Talha disappeared from his field of vision the illusion would disperse, and once again he would be stuck in the hospital room, all alone. Hurrying after Master, he tried to contain his unsettled emotions, but as soon as he looked up at Talha's back, his heart ached making him feel like dying. So he kept trailing behind with his gaze glued to Talha's shoes and his heart drumming in his ears, louder with every step he took.

The metal doors of the elevator closed behind him, making his muscles hurt from spasming. He couldn't relax even if he tried to. Standing within arm's reach yet unable to touch Master wrenched out his every nerve, but it didn't seem to disturb Talha. His breathing remained calm and rhythmical, his face—a mask of dispassion, and his eyes looking straight ahead of him.

Slater rarely feared anything, as fear was tantamount to a weakness. However, he couldn't ignore the dense ball of apprehension that formed in the pit of his stomach, that as soon as Master started talking, he would tell him to go away.

Slater wanted Master to keep silent forever, yet, he couldn't bear the mind-numbing stillness anymore. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, to break this silence but closed it, unable to break Talha's order. Sucking the air through his nose, he inhaled the faint smell of bitter almond and leather, mixed with warm notes of freshly brewed coffee.

His stomach clenched. He missed this scent and the warmth of Talha's skin, the sting of Talha's teeth clenching over his collarbone, the boiling amber of his eyes, brimming with lust and something else Slater could never name.

*This is stupid...* Slater opened his mouth again, determined to speak, but the doors hissed open. Talha stepped out, never looking back. Dropping his chin, Slater followed. He kept silent all the way from the hospital to the car, and grounded his teeth when Master pointed to the rear passenger seat.

The absence of bodyguards didn't escape his attention, nor did the fact that Talha took the wheel. He rarely drove alone, meaning he didn't want prying eyes watching them. Slater's heart raced.

Fixing his eyes at the reflection in the rearview mirror, he burned his Master's face with his thirsty stare. With all his being, he



wished for Talha to look at him, but the amber eyes were focused on the road. Not even once did they stray to Slater.

The familiar contours of the mansion, surfacing behind the window, made his jaw hurt with pressure. Fingers crumpling the sleeves of his black shirt, he watched Talha guide the car through the gates and park it in front of the main entrance. Unsure what to do, Slater scrutinized every move of his master, searching for a sign or mute order, but Talha unfastened his seat belt and got out of the car. Watching Master's powerful frame disappear behind the doors, Slater stumbled after.

His soft shoes silently skidded over the marble floor and stairs, as he followed Talha upstairs. The insignificant flickers of the bloody night his memory provided added to his anxiety. He didn't register entering the office but startled when the door shut behind him.

For four long weeks, he'd waited for this meeting, aching to see Talha and hear his voice. To fall on his knees and press his forehead to his master's hand and stay like this forever. Now, paralyzed under Talha's executive glare, he didn't dare breathe.

"You know, four weeks weren't nearly enough for me to face you and remain calm," Talha said, and Slater's stomach cramped. Sinking to his knees, he dropped his gaze; his fingers curling over his lap. Talha sighed and picked up a slim folder from the windowsill behind him. "Take this and disappear."

"What?" Slater's head jerked up before he realized it, and a gun fell into the picture. The black, matte metal absorbed the bright daylight, as it rested on the edge of the windowsill, handle forward. Slater's eyes strained as he searched for a shadow of a smile on Talha's face but read only determination.

"This is your bank account information with payments for every kill you did for me. This should be enough for you to start over. Take this and leave the country tonight," Talha said, tossing the folder toward the ripper. It fell on the floor a few feet away from his knee. "Pick it up and go away."

*Slater is dreaming. This isn't real...* Slater gaped at the brown paper folder.

"No." He barely heard himself say, forcing his stinging eyes to look up. "Slater won't leave."

“Then you die,” Talha said matter-of-factly, examining his nails, as if the non-existent dirt he could find under them was more interesting than Slater. “You don’t have a choice.”

Slater narrowed his eyes, then cocked his head in denial. *Master can’t mean it...*

Refusing to believe it, Slater swallowed and carefully pressed his palm to the hardwood floor in front of him. Cold and dusty, it wore the evidence of desolation.

*Did Master lose everything and now can’t afford a maid?* But he didn’t hang on the thought for long as it mattered not. Historically, money, power, and influence had always changed hands like a cheap, syphilitic whore, infecting the world. Illusive, they bore no value for him, because he knew that the real power was silent, invisible, yet deadly—like his karambit.

“Don’t fucking move!” Talha warned, but Slater put the other hand forward, making the first crawling step toward Talha. Eyes glowing with hatred, Talha shouted, “I said, don’t fucking move!”

That was new. Master rarely raised his voice and never yelled. Slater froze, facing the muzzle of a gun pointed at his eye. He flinched, as realization sank in. *Master isn’t joking. Master doesn’t want Slater anymore.*

Talha’s cheek twitched as he started talking in a hurried, feverish manner. Never before had Slater seen Talha so agitated. “You don’t even realize what you have done. What your actions cost me. I’m not even talking about money, but the people who trusted me, worked for me? Zaal... You baked him like a fucking pig when all he had ever done was protecting you from yourself. He was one of ours, Slater!”

“Slater missed Master.” Taking another crawling step, he feasted on Talha’s emotion. Potent and rich, they painted the world in bright colors, making him feel alive. His chest felt so full he thought he was dying. He almost smiled, realizing that Talha was mad, not indifferent. He could deal with anger, but not with disdain.

“Shut up.” Finger, gliding over the matte steel, removed the safety.

“Slater will do everything for Master...”

“Do what? What else can you possibly do?” Talha laughed. His eyes so bright, they shimmered with a touch of insanity. Talha shook his head, took a long breath, and rubbed his brow with the

heel of his armed hand, the barrel stirring his hair strands. When he spoke again, his voice sounded calm. “You don’t even realize what you’ve done, do you? Dogs like you don’t have remorse. Even if I could have forgiven you for losing London, I can’t forgive the bloodshed and what you did to me.”

A grimace of disappointment seized Talha’s face. Slater hated seeing the hard lines around Master’s mouth, the thinned out upper lip, and his narrowed eyes. The bitter smell of Talha’s emotions reminded Slater of Camilla’s decaying head. He hated it. To fix it, he said, “Slater missed Master.”

Talha ignored him. Slater’s mind trailed sinking in the memory.

The claw-knife notching Talha’s chest... the sweet taste of his blood... the warmth of his body... the almost painful contractions of his passage. Slater didn’t regret a single thing as he stored those visions in the depth of his memory, making them sacred.

Warmth crawled under Slater’s skin as he knew that master carried his marks on his body, under his white linen shirt. The marks that would remain on Master’s chest forever.

*Mine... Master is mine. No one else can touch him. No one else will ever touch him. Only Slater.*

“I don’t need you anymore,” Talha whispered. “We are done. Leave now, or I’ll shoot you.”

Ignoring his words, Slater slowly advanced toward Talha’s shoe. A burning need to touch his master’s skin shredded his chest more painfully than a bullet could ever do. “Slater won’t go anywhere. Slater will stay with Master.”

“Stay back,” Talha croaked, swallowing hard. His finger found the trigger but didn’t pull it.

Slater inched forward. His forehead bumped against Talha’s knee as he squeezed his eyes shut and dropped his chest to the floor.

“Master belongs to Slater.” With a flat tongue, Slater licked Talha’s beige leather shoe, before rubbing his cheek against his shin then higher, against his knee, then further, until his pupils locked with the liquid fire of the amber eyes. “Master can’t have anyone else.”

“Back off.” The muzzle shifted, and the cold barrel pressed to Slater’s forehead.

“Even if Master hates Slater, there is no escape. Slater will go nowhere. Slater will do everything for Master. If Master wants Slater to disappear, Master should pull the trigger now.” Latching onto Talha’s pants, Slater tugged his body upward. His cheek rubbed against the cold metal as he stared Talha in the eye. His mouth opened, and his tongue trailed the black metal of the gun before he closed his lips around the barrel, the way he would do around Talha’s cock. Pulling away, he circled the tip with his tongue then pressed a wet kiss on the side before taking the barrel into his mouth again.

Confusion erased the hardness of Master’s glare, and a light pink colored his cheekbones. The apple of his throat jumped when he swallowed.

*Yes, Master, look at Slater.*

“You are useless to me.” Hoarse and low, Talha’s voice lacked certainty. He shoved Slater away with his knee.

Teeth clanged against the metal, before the handle of the gun crushed down to Slater’s cheek. Bright spots stained his vision, and ringing reverberated in his ears when he whacked against the floor, blinking the pain away. Electric jolts rushed from his teeth to his nape as a metallic taste flooded his mouth. Swallowing blood, he glared up.

Talha’s eyes glinted with metal. “Step away. For weeks, I was trying to come up with an excuse for you, but I couldn’t find a single reason why I should keep you alive. And now, I don’t even know why I talk to you... You never listen. You say things I want to hear without meaning them, because they got you out of trouble too many times. You think sex and beating can solve everything, but this time is different. This isn’t working. I should have killed you long ago.”

Slater’s eyes twitched. With shaking hands, he clasped Talha’s pants. Master didn’t push him away, allowing his palm to slap his chest, as the ripper brushed his nose against his hips. When his face leveled the tanned belt, Talha fisted his hair. Tugging onto his scalp, he bent Slater backward as he bent forward.

The pressure in Slater’s spine sent jolts of pain to his head, forcing a hiss out of his throat. Slater’s spine vibrated as he stared into the boiling voids of Talha’s amber eyes. The muzzle pressed to

the side of his throat, as Talha inched closer. Their eyes leveled. The air between them heated with their breathing.

“Name one reason why I should let you live.”

Slater froze, mesmerized. Master’s eyes resembled gems. Bright and rich, the color stratified to dozens of fractions, each darker than the next. Slater thought that if one day he killed Master, he would certainly keep his eyes, so he could look at them forever. Without thinking, Slater curled his toes. Fisting Master’s shirt he tugged himself upward, colliding his bleeding mouth with Talha’s lips. A gasp of surprise crashed against his teeth as Slater opened his mouth wider, licking Talha’s lips. Fisting the corners of Master’s shirt, he forced himself deeper into the kiss.

Blissful warmth and softness welcomed him, as Talha timidly replied to the needy, awkward flexes of his jaw. Sweet and tender, the kiss melted his organs with heat. The familiar weakness kisses always instilled in him made his limbs tremble. Usually, he would hate it, but now he welcomed it with all his soul, wanting to feel Master more.

“Slater is weak,” he whispered into Talha’s mouth, never breaking the eye contact. Talha’s pupils blew, turning irises into boiling rings of magma. Before Master could bounce back from a shock, Slater added, “Slater loves Master...”

The painful grip at the back of his head weakened, as Talha pulled away. His lips red and glistening with the mix of Slater’s blood and saliva.

“Shut up. You don’t know what love is,” Talha said, but his words lacked strength, coming out breathy and shaky. “You only say it because you think it is what I want to hear.”

“Slater loves Master...” Voice barely above a whisper, he inhaled the painfully familiar smell of bitter almond and rubbed his face against Talha’s abs. The rough linen fabric of the white shirt chaffed his cheek. “Slater will kill anyone who stands in Slater’s way. Slater isn’t sorry, because Slater will do it again if Master touches someone else.”

Talha’s eyes softened. The ever-present attention returned to the depth of his pupils, as he examined Slater’s face with concern.

“Slater will drown the world in blood... for Master.” Slater swallowed, devouring Talha’s lips with his eyes. “There is no escape. Give up.”

“You are fucking trouble...” The warm breath played over Slater’s chin as Talha leaned into the ripper and brushed his lips against Slater’s. The slippery tongue wormed its way into his mouth as the amber eyes closed shut. Possessive and impatient, two palms fisted Slater’s hair, one still holding the gun. Slater didn’t mind. The cool surface of the metal chilled his throbbing temple, making it easier for him to concentrate.

Fighting the small tremors settling into his body, he dropped his eyelids closed, watching Master through his lashes. Swimming in ecstasy and erupting passion, he thought that as long as Slater was Master’s only weakness it would be fine, just like Master was Slater’s.

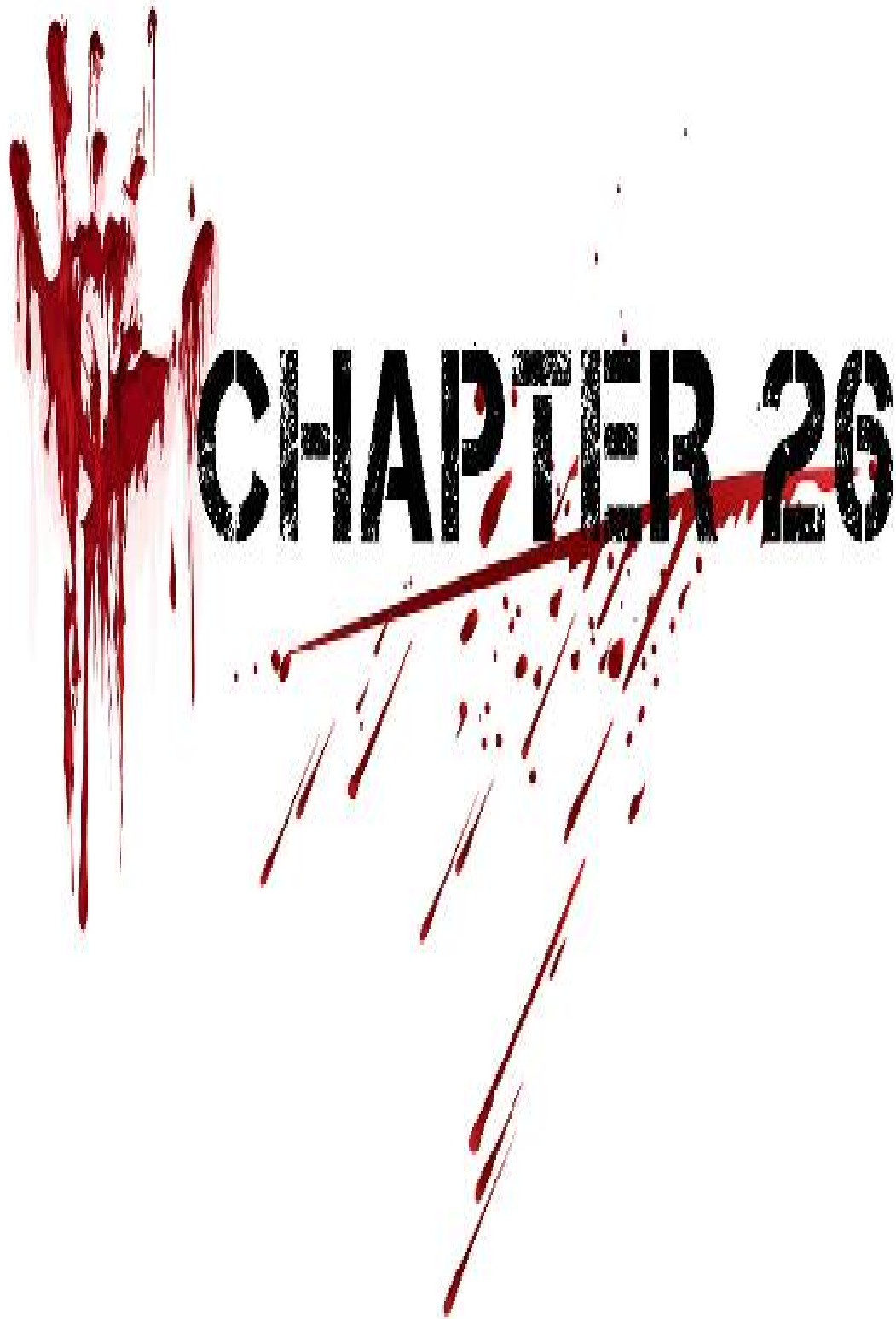
The tight ball of pressure building up in his chest, detonated and killed a million small, unsettled thoughts with sharp shards of pure, raw lust.

“Slater will do everything for Master,” he breathed into Talha’s mouth and closed his eyes.

Talha’s lips curled into a smile under the kiss, before repeating, “So fucking troublesome...”



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# CHAPTER 26

***I'M SO FUCKED...*** The thought melted in a heartbeat, as he pressed his tongue to Slater's chin and dragged it toward his mouth. Imprinting a wet kiss to his bottom lip, he waited for Slater to relax his jaw, before lapping his tongue over his slick teeth. Sweet breath



ricocheted in his throat when his tongue slipped deeper, engaging Slater in a kiss.

His chest so full he could barely breathe. He didn't know why he felt this weird elation because Slater's words had always lacked weight. Incapable of deep emotion, Slater didn't know what love was, so his confessions meant nothing. Yet, Talha couldn't care less.

Swallowing the metallic taste of Slater's blood, he traced the rim of his lips, blindly searching for a cut in the ripper's mouth with the tip of his tongue. Locating on the inner side of his cheek, an inch away from the left corner of his mouth, it oozed with electric saltiness.

Running his tongue over it, he soothed the cut with light, gentle licks, every moment expecting for a knife to nick his throat, as had happened before. And for the first time in years, Talha wondered if this madness had a future.

Trying to retain the remains of common sense, he pulled back, and his head emptied. Eyes shimmering with need, Slater's skin glowed with the color of arousal.

"More, Master," the sinful mouth begged, glistening with saliva and blood.

Talha squeezed his eyes so hard they felt like bursting, before opening them again, but the illusion didn't evaporate. On his knees, needy and shameless, Slater ran his tongue over his bottom lip.

Talha needed that lewd mouth to clasp around his thickness to subdue the burning pain that spasmed his balls. Cock straining hard, it chafed against the rough fabric of his linen pants, and even the thin layer of his cotton underwear didn't save his sensitive head from the painful sensation.

To distract himself from the gravity pull coming from Slater's indecent body, he brought the gun up and outlined the contour of the young face with the muzzle. Trembling with need, Slater was so beautiful. His desperate hands kept clinging to Talha's shirt, building an impression that the ripper would collapse once his fingers grew weaker. Thick veins pumped with blood at the top of his hands. Bending around his whitened knuckles, they rushed up his forearms, the old burns like islands among them.

*So fucking beautiful...* Guiding the tip of the gun over the swollen lips, Talha couldn't stop thinking how prettily the weapon

contrasted with Slater's skin. Even if the ripper hated it; especially because he hated it.

"So, you like guns, after all?" he asked, his voice drenched with lust.

Curiosity, alertness, heat—everything mixed in the pupils, dilated with need, when Slater purred, "Master's only."

"Was it delicious?"

Slater's eyes flared with mischief. His lips parted to reply, but Talha had already changed his mind.

"Shhh." Bringing the barrel to Slater's mouth, he ordered, "Keep your mouth busy."

Without hesitation, Slater teased the barrel with the tip of his tongue. Lips caressing the steel, he let the length slip down his throat before pulling back. Eyes hooded, he repeated it over and over, inflaming Talha's blood with his lustful gaze.

Trunks clung to his leaking cock, and all thoughts abandoned him, as his everything concentrated on the slow movements of Slater's mouth. A stupid, all-consuming envy toward the gun devastated. That greedy, possessive mouth should have been all over his cock, but every movement of Slater's tongue was directed to the senseless steel.

Yet, instead of stopping this stupid act, he encouraged it. "Use your tongue more."

His hand reached his groin, adjusting his hurting cock. The harsh fabric, rubbing against his cockhead sent a rush of painful pleasure through him, making it impossible to hold back. He unzipped his pants and reached inside to give his aching length relief with a stroke. Jumping upright, his dick slapped his stomach, marring it with a sticky mess of precum.

Slater gulped against the steel, his pale eyes concentrating on a clear drop leaking out from the slit.

"Do you want to lick it?" Slater nodded eagerly. The sound of his teeth catching the metal made Talha cringe. His free hand found Slater's chin, lifted it, and he carefully withdrew the gun from his mouth.

Impatient, Slater shook off his touch, lurched forward, and caught the shimmering drop with the tip of his tongue. A low sound

coming from his chest turned into a moan. His eyelashes trembled and dropped; pleasure clearing his forehead of a vertical line.

“Does it taste this good?” Talha bit his lip to prevent his dick from overruling his mind.

Slater grinned. His wicked tongue teased beneath the cockhead, then circled it, coating him in blissful warmth and softness. Air puffs chilling the wet skin every time Slater pulled back or broke the contact.

Having had no sex in weeks, Talha couldn't suppress a moan. His face on fire, he rolled his head backward, disintegrating in the strong sensation. When he glanced down again, Slater's eyes groped him with a hungry, predatory expression.

*Fuck...* Talha gulped, mentally slapping himself for showing weakness. Guiding the ripper's head away from his groin, he shoved Slater to the floor. Hands whacking the dark, polished wood, he kept his focus on Talha. “Stay.”

On all fours, with his body stiff with attention, Slater was stunning. The need to taste his skin brought Talha to his knees behind the ripper. With one hand still holding the gun, he used his free one to roll up Slater's black shirt, revealing his scarred back. It had been so long since he inhaled the faint aroma of cloves and wood, etched into the ripper's skin. Placing the armed hand to the floor, he steadied himself. Blowing a stream of air, he caressed the hollowed groove of his spine, watching Slater's every muscle ripple with anticipation. The younger man writhed, every hair rising. Tiny, soft, colorless, and so appealing. Hand wrapping around Slater's torso, Talha caressed the bulges of his abs, as his mouth dropped to the small of his back. He nearly moaned again, when the familiar scent of Slater's skin filled his lungs, hazing his mind.

Nails, scraping oblique muscles, reached Slater's chest. Talha smiled hearing a yelp of pain as he pinched his nipple. The sound so small and desperate, that Talha squeezed his eyes, then sank his teeth into Slater's shoulder-blade so he could hear it again.

*I'm so fucked...*

Tongue, brushing over the reddening teeth print, slicked down, counting the raised welts, as his impatient hand sneaked toward Slater's zipper. With a jerky movement, he pushed the button through the loop, then undid the fly. Kissing and biting a path down Slater's flank, he stripped him of his jeans and underwear.

Sitting back, he took into the view, as his hands couldn't stay away from the round globes of Slater's ass.

The silverish hue of the cane scars stood out against his tanned skin. His balls tightened, and even if Talha couldn't see his cock from this position, he didn't miss a shimmering thread of precum stretching from under his belly to the floor.

Talha's cock bobbed from the view. Slater placed his knees wider and pushed his ass up, presenting himself. His dusky pink hole twitched, betraying his anticipation, balls tight and round, as his whole body stilled, expecting something.

"Master..." Slater's voice shook as he begged. With a smirk, Talha slapped his butt cheek, leaving a burning print behind, then spat on his hole. The sphincter twitched, eager to swallow the transparent liquid, and Talha pressed his thumb to the stretchy skin, smearing the spittle all over. Slater moaned, then shuddered, as Talha's nail pressed to his opening, forcing its way in.

*So fucking lewd.* Talha had to clasp his cock and give it a light stroke as impatience quickened his blood.

Soft and compliant, Slater's sphincter contorted around his digit. Talha spat again, and, using his thumb as a hook, opened Slater up. The drop of saliva skidded around his thumb and disappeared in the depth of Slater's body.

"More..." Slater begged.

"So greedy, aren't you?" Talha pulled back and licked his lips, bringing his armed hand to his knee. Slater's hips bucked. His reddened hole contracted, begging to be fucked. Slave of his needs, Slater jerked his chin in an impatient gesture.

Talha's eyes narrowed as his head cleared. No matter how he looked at it, this wasn't the punishment he'd wanted to administer to Slater. If he kept going, things would never change. Slater would never learn, and one day another bloody feast would greet him in his home.

*No, this can't go on.* An icy needle panged through Talha's core, giving birth to an evil idea. Lifting the armed hand, he nudged Slater's entrance with the muzzle.

Slater tensed. Talha reinforced the order, "STAY."

Filling his mouth with saliva, he spat in the cleft. The liquid, dribbling down, pooled over the hole and around the barrel.

*Pretty...* Talha thought, nudging the creasy skin with the gun, smearing the moisture around. The puckered skin stretched under the pressure. Slater gasped as the barrel breached his passage, slowly sinking inside.

Talha's mind obscured, as his eyes refused to blink. The black metal disappearing inside Slater's body was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen in his life.



**PAIN STUNNED** Slater as the cruel metal kept forcing its way into his body. Cold and hard, it didn't bring any pleasure but chilled his insides with embryonic fear. The front sight scratched the tender tissue of his passage, setting his insides on fire. He yelped, arched back, and his mouth froze in a silent cry.

"No, Master. Hurts," he complained, but the evil hand slapped his ass.

"Stay still, or I might accidentally pull the trigger." Amusement, too evident in Talha's voice, made him glance over his shoulder. Fear, solidifying, crystallized his marrow and nearly eclipsed his arousal as a wicked glint in the depth of Talha's eyes greeted him. "That's actually, not a bad idea, huh? I can pull a trigger now, Slater. Finish this all."

The hand worked its way down Slater's body until the back of Talha's fingers pressed against his taint.

Adrenaline syringing into Slater's blood, sending his heart in a violent dash.

"How do you like the idea?" Talha's voice, calm and cold, dried Slater's eyes. "You'll die in pure agony. The same agony you subjected your victims to, I assume."

*Did Master trick Slater? Will Slater die now?* He imagined the bullet tearing through his guts, turning him into a bleeding, quivering mess of stinking flesh. *Disgusting...*

"It will be a very long, painful death, full of disgrace, and would last for hours." Talha's hand kept rhythmically fucking him, stirring the invisible spot that had always made him lose his mind. Despite the fear, his cock was painfully hard and every sense in his body rang with attention. "Shaking, bleeding through all the holes in your body. Should I make Camilla watch you die?"

Baring his teeth, Slater growled. His toes curled, ready to push himself upright, but the vicious gun slammed into his guts, making him claw the polished wood in maddening pain.

"Follow the fucking order, you disloyal dog. Keep still!"

"Master?" Eyes stinging, Slater rapidly blinked through the numbing ache that still roamed through his guts.

"That would be a very fitting death for a disloyal dog like you, don't you agree?"

*Master is scary...* A small tremor took over his limbs as his mouth dried up. His eyes fixed on the scratches his nails had left on the polished wood. The thrust of the metal slowed down. Now, almost gentle and smooth, it caressed his insides. Bright colors sparked in his eyes, and a potent scent of arousal thickened the air. Every thrust echoed through his body with sweet heat, making his organs melt, then boil.

A part of him expected the familiar click of a trigger to precede the tearing pain and booming sound, but the blooming pleasure didn't let him digest the thought.

***CLICK!***

Slater staggered forward. His ass contracted, clasp around the barrel in a vice-like grip. Master chuckled, and Slater realized that it was Talha clicking his tongue.

“Master is cruel,” Slater whispered, glancing over his shoulder. A splash of indignation and betrayal in his heart made him frown. Talha’s lips twitched.

“So, even Iblīs can be scared, huh?” A palm, weirdly gentle, brushed beneath his right eye, wiping his sweat. Instinctively, Slater followed it with his face, chasing the sensation.

“You have no idea how appealing you are right now.” Slater didn’t know if Master told it to himself or Slater, but it didn’t matter, as the warmed up steel was brutally pulled out of his body, and something hot and pulsing substituted for it.

Unlike the metal, the touch was so smooth, burning and slick, that Slater dissolved in relief. Pushing away from the floor, he arched his spine, looking to increase the physical contact. His sweaty cheek brushed against Master’s lips, releasing an enormous dose of endorphins into his system.

The flare of heat slammed into his head. The tension released, leaving him convulsing in the hormonal overload. His eyes rolled back as Talha’s hips collided against his ass, then again and again. His mouth hung open, and moisture escaped its limits, trailing down his chin. Every thrust of Talha’s cock extracted a whimper out of his throat. Defeated, Slater disintegrated in Master’s arms, feeling rearranged, reborn. Slater loved and hated it at once.

The painful spasm took over his cock and balls, making him cry out his orgasm, as his ass clenched around Talha’s length, begging it to stay still.

His cry muted with a red heat, as gunfire sounded in his ears. Deafening him, it erased everything around.



**TALHA'S CHEST ACHED** with the powerful orgasm as he pulled out of Slater's shaking body and sat back by his side. Gazing at the quivering mess his reaper became, he blew a gush of air over his sweaty skin, then smiled, as the reaper collapsed to his side, his eyes empty.

Coated in a shimmering layer of perspiration, with his lungs heaving in oxygen deprivation and eyes drenched with tears, he looked so pure, so young, so innocent. Mesmerizing. A mix of shock and confusion added to his beauty.

"You are so..." Talha breathed. Looking for a word, he caressed the wet side of Slater's face with the back of his palm. "...gorgeous."

Slater gulped, rolling on his back. Tears escaping his eyes painted two shimmering trails over his cheekbones. Leaning in, Talha licked them off, tasting the saltiness, then kissed Slater's slack mouth.

"I doubt I'll ever meet anyone like you again," Talha added, brushing the wet hair away from the ripper's face. "So concentrate now, and try to remember this. Because I won't repeat it."

Slater blinked, and more water escaped his eyes, then mouth. With a smirk, Talha ran the back of his palm over Slater's chin,



collecting the moisture, then licked his index finger, tasting it. Sweet and salty, it tasted like tears.

“If you betray me again...” The muzzle of a gun lifted Slater’s shirt and poked him in his belly. “... the next bullet will enter here. Do you understand?”

Slowly, as if still unable to believe his eyes, Slater rolled his head to the side, his eyes fixing on the bullet hole in the wall for a long moment, before returning to Talha.

“That was hot...” he breathed; admiration fired up his eyes. “Let’s do it again!”

A shaky hand grabbed Talha’s shirt and pulled him closer, as the ripper locked their lips together.

*I’m so fucked...* Talha thought, closing his eyes and disappearing in the kiss. *He learned nothing.*



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**THE NOTHINGNESS SHATTERED** with the booming sound of heavy footsteps, and a familiar scent of bitter almond and leather wafted through the air. Slater swallowed and flexed his hurting muscles. The painful pressure in his spine wrenched out his nerves,

making him lose his patience and want to pull out the safety bolt to release himself.

Kneeling on the floor with his hands cuffed behind his back, he lifted his face toward the sound. The leather blindfold prevented him from seeing his master, but his face, brushing against the thin warm fabric, outlined Talha's knee.

“Don't wipe your drool off on my pants. You are spoiling them.”

The hot palm gave a few bracing slaps to his cheek before his master pulled onto the chain that interlinked his wrists and ankles. His hamstrings shrieked in agony before the carabiner clicked and the pressure in his spine disappeared.

Talha stepped back, and Slater, losing his balance, whacked against the floor. The rough surface chafed his cheek; he wriggled his spine, trying to increase blood circulation in his numb limbs.

A warm airwave licked his cheek informing him of his master squatting down by his side a moment before a hand ruffled his hair. Gentle yet rough, Talha's fingers released the clasp at the back of his head and the blindfold slipped down a second before Talha tugged the ball out of Slater's mouth.

“I have a job for you. Be ready in two hours.” A warm breath brushed against his cheek as a hand caressed his chin before lifting it. Talha's eyes shimmered; he leaned closer and a fleeting touch of his cool lips grazed over Slater's wet mouth. The kiss broke before he managed to respond, and the coarse surface of paper abraded his tongue, as Master thrust a fat envelope into his mouth. The acrid smell of glue followed. “Bite.”

Craning his neck, Slater spat the envelope to the floor. He grinned, brushed his cheek against his master's shin, before licking Talha's shoe. “Thank you, Master.”

“You are gross...” Talha said. The shoe disappeared from under Slater's cheek, and sharp pain blossomed under his ribs as a heavy sole crushed down on his back from above. “Clean yourself. We leave in two hours.”



**THE END**  
**LOOK FOR SAVAŞ' STORY IN 2021**

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# ABOUT NERO SEAL

Journalist, poker player, casino events manager, designer, and SEO specialist, Nero Seal tried it all before committing to the idea of being an M/M fiction writer. Living in one of the most homophobic countries in the world, he has a lot to say. Being an avid traveler, he creates his imaginary worlds on the places he's been and the people he's met.

Characters always talk in his head, forcing him to write their stories, using his 49 kinks as the ultimate weapon of allure. When the voices in his head aren't slaving him around, he is drawing, hiking, and procrastinating important things in favor of momentary gratification.



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- 
- [1] Iblīs –in the Qur’an Iblīs is described as the fallen jinn made of a smokeless fire and often is identified as Satan in the Christian Bible.
- [2] Minik kuş – little bird (Turk.)
- [3] Abi – older brother (Turk.)
- [4] Kardeşim – younger sibling (Turk.)
- [5] Geri çekil, köpek! – back off, dog (Turk.)
- [6] Hanımım/Hanım – a female royal and aristocratic title / Mistress (Turk.)
- [7] Defol – go away (Turk.)
- [8] Reis – Master/Leader (Turk.)
- [9] Mardin - a city in southeastern Turkey
- [10] Kilim – a flat tapestry-woven [carpet](#) or rug.
- [11] Imam – a title of a worship leader of a mosque and Muslim community.
- [12] Orosu çocuğu – son of a bitch (turk)
- [13] Bey – Mister (Turk.)
- [14] Allahismarladik – Allah greets you (Turk.) Being said as a good bye.
- [15] Güle-güle – Bye-bye.
- [16] Bismillah – “In the name of God”; it is the first word in the Qur’an being said as a word of protection from evil. (Arabic)
- [17] Abaya - a robe-like dress, worn by some women in parts of the Muslim world.
- [18] Hijab – a headscarf worn by some Muslim women.
- [19] Mashrabiya - an architectural element which is characteristic of Arabic residences. It is a type of projecting oriel window enclosed with carved wood latticework.
- [20] Agha – (Ağa) is an honorific title for a civilian or military officer, or often part of such title, and was placed after the name of certain civilian or military functionaries in the Ottoman Empire. Kurdish society gives the title “agha” to tribal chieftains - either supreme chieftains or village heads. It is also given to wealthy landlords and owners of major real estate in the urban Kurdish centers.
- [21] Ifrīt - a powerful type of demon in Islamic mythology.
- [22] Bedlah - a belly dancer’s suit.
- [23] Mardin’in Piçi – Mardin’s bastard. (Turk.)
- [24] Walī – custodian, protector, helper, a man close to God, or holy man. also Wali is someone who has “Walayah” (authority or guardianship) over somebody else.

(Arabic)

<sup>[25]</sup> Fajr prayer - the first of the 5 daily prayers.

<sup>[26]</sup> Salamün aleyküm - a greeting in Arabic that means “Peace be upon you”.

<sup>[27]</sup> Shahada - the basic statement of the Islamic faith: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger.”

<sup>[28]</sup> Haram - an Arabic term meaning forbidden.

<sup>[29]</sup> The Golden Crescent is the name given to one of Asia’s two principal areas of illicit opium production.

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EPILOGUE

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